The Choosing Person: Marriage, Middle-Class Identities, and Modernity in contemporary Sri Lanka

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The Choosing Person: Marriage, Middle-Class Identities, and Modernity in Contemporary Sri Lanka

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DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis has been entirely composed by me and is my own original work with acknowledgement of other sources, and that the work has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

Signed: .....

Date: 01/07/2013

Dedication

***for* Garvin:**
for attempting to live with me the 'ideal' of companionate marriage and for working through its ambivalences

AND

***for* my Parents:**
whose dreams for me have always been in technicolour

Abstract

Changing notions of marriage and family across the globe—from kinship obligation, social reproduction, and complementary labour to an ideal of marriage based on affective bonds, emotional intimacy, and pleasure—is widely read as indicating the shift from tradition to modernity. The modern companionate marriage ideal is then linked to a larger cultural transformation: the development of the modern individual self. The emergence of modern conceptions of the self in North America and Western Europe that emphasizes personal autonomy over the authority of the patriarchal family is said to have resulted in the decline of power parents and kin had over the choice of marriage partner with marriage coming to be seen as a person's individual choice. Moreover, because companionate marriage demands a high degree of emotional and personal commitment it is generally accepted that such marriages must be entered into voluntarily, thereby recasting marriage as a contractual agreement between two people rather than an alliance between two families. Narratives about choice in marriage are, therefore, part of a historical process that emphasizes an "inner self" as integral to modern subjectivity and gives credence to individual agency in intimate relations.

My thesis explores how marriage norms, family structures, and kinship relations amongst the middle-class in Sri Lanka have been transformed by social change from the early part of the twentieth century to the present. It aims to understand the ways in which modernity is reconfiguring people's expectations of intimate relations and shaping women's experiences and presentations of the 'self'. In doing so, it attempts to answer three main questions: How do changing expectations of marriage structure people's narratives about individual agency? To what extent do kinship obligations, caste considerations, and class mobility structure people's choices in marriage? And finally, what implications do these findings have for the feminist theorization of agency and personhood?

Based on fifteen months of fieldwork amongst Sinhala Buddhist middle-class families living in the city of Colombo, I argue that the urban middle-class in Sri Lanka have collectively invested in the narrative of choice through which a choosing person is consciously created as a mark of modernity and progress. However, people's life histories show how, rather than indicating a radical shift in the way people negotiated between individual desires and social norms, the emphasis on choice signals a shift in in the narrative devices used in the presentation of the self. Moreover, I argue that rather than signalling freedom, these narratives reveal how □eople are often burdened with the risks and responsibility of agency and grapple with making the "right" choices. By carefully deconstructing people's anxieties that underline their narratives about choosing the right kind of partner, I reveal how choices are, in fact, structured by social norms and the expectations of family. I argue that marriage continues to be a principal strategy for social mobility and the assertion of status in contemporary Sri Lanka. Therefore, I demonstrate how caste and class considerations form the basis on which collective manoeuvring is undertaken to influence individual choices. I then argue that the trope of individual agency is not universal to all narratives about marriage and family. By examining alternative stories about marriage that defy the accepted convention I show how narratives of agency, which are deployed in certain contexts, are downplayed or denied in others; that the 'self', which is presented as making individual choices and actively shaping its own destiny in one context, is presented as the object of fate and circumstance in others. I conclude that because what it means to be middle-class is always a process of negotiation between competing and contradictory notions of tradition and modernity, people's presentation of the self reveal the perpetual striving that seems to characterise modern subjectivity.

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Acknowledgements

And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
T.S. Eliot – *Four Quartets*

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……

Introduction

A Family Wedding

The questions I pose in my thesis began to take shape some years ago during those pensive moments you find yourself, having unconsciously escaped the present, contemplating the meaning of things. The year is 2007 and I am accompanying my parents to a family wedding. Even before the event, I had been rather taken aback by the venue—a five-star hotel in Sri Lanka's capital city of Colombo. The wedding itself and the questions it raised regarding marriage and the nature of social change in Sri Lanka captured my imagination and frequently occupied those moments of introspection for years to come. The 'self' my 23-year-old niece Venuri presented on her wedding day—stunning as a magazine-cover bride in a shimmering low-cut sari blouse, sipping champagne unselfconsciously during the toast, taking the floor with ease for the first dance— took me by complete surprise.

I was ten when her mother, my cousin Amitha *Akki*,[1] got married two decades before at the age of 28. The wedding ceremony was held in their modest home in my father's village in Kandy located in the central highlands.[2] The *pōruva* (wedding dais) was erected in the main hall and the 'good' chairs, some their own and some borrowed from our grandparents' house, had been carefully arranged for the 'important' guests, namely the immediate family members of the bride and groom. The others sat on rented [illegible] chairs in a temporary shed erected in the garden, while the children played on the path across the paddy fields that led to the house. Alcohol was discreetly served from a bedroom that was partially hidden from the hall. Many of the younger men, too embarrassed to drink in the presence of elders, gulped down their 'shots' inside before hurrying out to re-join the crowd. The women sipped 'cool' drinks and caught up on the family news. My aunt and uncle seemed to be everywhere at once on that day, welcoming guests and making sure the day's events ran smoothly.

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* [illegible]

[1] *'Akki'* is derived from *'Akkā',* meaning 'older-sister'. It is an affectionate [illegible] form of address people use for older female relatives of the same generation.

[2] See Appendix for maps of Sri Lanka pertaining to this thesis

Amitha *Akki*, clad in the same wedding sari her sister had worn three years ago, sat on the main couch with the groom, intermittently licking her lips because she was self-conscious about the lipstick she was forced to wear for the occasion. The marriage had been arranged through a mutual relative, but the relationship was too distant for my cousin to have met the groom more than a couple of times at family weddings. To ease the sense of awkwardness she must have been feeling, Amitha *Akki* frequently grabbed hold of any one of her younger cousins who happened to pass by, making us sit by her as she introduced us to the groom—explaining whose child we were and listing our achievements in school and also our quirks. The groom responded by squeezing our cheeks and teasing us. I remember my cousin not budging from that couch until it was time for her to leave home. After the home-coming ceremony, which was held at the groom's home the next day, the newly-wed couple spent their honeymoon with my parents on the tea plantation my father managed.[3] To spare the groom any embarrassment he would have felt in being alone with his wife's relatives, he was accompanied by two of his cousins. My parents still have the photographs from that time. Amitha *Akki* and her husband—she, looking a little shy, and he, looking somewhat sheepish—stand side-by-side surrounded by my parents, his cousins, and my younger brothers and me.

My niece had met her husband at a school friend's party. Amitha *Akki* proudly announced to me that the young couple were flying to Singapore after the home-coming ceremony because the young man had recently started working there. Venuri was going to set up home in their newly-rented apartment and start looking for suitable employment. I observed with fascination the confidence with which Venuri, accompanied by her husband, weaved through the hall stopping at every table, as is the □r□□□□□ □□□ , to thank each guest for their presence—making polite conversation with some, laughing with others, and treating her elders with deference. Although both sets of parents were close at hand to introduce those guests the young people did not know, it was clear that the couple were the focal point. After dinner the young couple danced until it was time to leave. The 'thank-you' card distributed at the end of

[3] The 'home-coming' is held at the groom's home and is a ceremony held to welcome the bride to her new home.

□□□ event was a glossy photograph of the couple alone in a lush garden holding hands and gazing fondly at each other as the sun set in the background.

As I reflected on these two family weddings, I wondered—how did a 'traditional' Sinhala-speaking middle-class family produce a fashionable English-speaking daughter like my niece? How did a modest family living outside of Colombo come to host such a lavish wedding in the city? How had my niece managed to find the 'right' husband on her own? How did she, with seeming ease, negotiate between her 'modern' self and the 'traditional' background she came from? And, why did she seem to be more in control of her life than the women in the previous generation? Within the space of twenty years things seemed to have dramatically changed for that branch of my father's family who had until recently continued to live in the village. But I should not have been so surprised. Looking around, I realised that the questions I was posing were equally pertinent to many families living in urban Sri Lanka. Children were growing up to be quite unlike their parents.

Marriage, Agency, and the Self – Framing the Questions

The questions I found myself asking after my niece's wedding were trying to make sense of the relationship between social transformation, marriage, and the 'self'. It is not surprising that such questions emerged in the context of marriage. Marriage, and the inter-related social institutions of family and kinship, is fundamental to the formation of a person's social identity. It is within them that a person forms close and inter-dependent relationships and experiences relatedness. They are also central to a person's sense of belonging and security. From a functionalist perspective, marriage is a social obligation for the purpose of biological reproduction. For the Sinhala-Buddhist community in Sri Lanka, as for other communities in South Asia, marriage is one of the most important cultural rituals. It is a rite-of-passage signifying a person's transition to adulthood and is, therefore, critical to achieving social status. Marriage is also an important cultural practice through which families form new alliances and renew existing kinship ties. Amongst the Sinhalese marriage is regarded as a reciprocal

kinship obligation. It is a parent's duty and responsibility to make sure their children are married. Parents are anxious when their daughters and sons remain unmarried past the culturally accepted age—usually around twenty-seven for women and thirty-five for men. To remain unmarried is thought to negatively reflect on parents who regard themselves as having failed to fulfil one of the most important obligations by their children. Prior to and during my fieldwork I met several women, and even a few men, who wept when talking about their unmarried daughters. On the other hand, it is a child's duty to get married. Through marriage and reproduction people are not only achieving social status for themselves, but they are also enabling their kin to claim new statuses critical to their life trajectory and wellbeing. In other words, unless a person gets married and has children, parents cannot become grandparents, nor can siblings become aunts and uncles.

Marriage is culturally constructed as the principal source of personal fulfilment especially for women. It is the only legitimate space in which women can express their sexuality and experience motherhood. Older unmarried women are often stereotyped as being 'bad tempered' and the inference is to sexual frustration. A 'good' marriage, characterised by stability, reproduction, and a rich network of affective relationships, denotes success in life for a woman. The Sinhalese are, on the whole, troubled by unmarried women. This is evident in the way marriage is thought of as an inevitability — 'when are you getting married?'—is the oft asked question, and single women are asked to explain themselves—'why aren't you married as yet?' To be unmarried is to be outside of 'normal' family life and intimate relations. It signifies a 'lack', is always problematic, and rarely accepted as a legitimate choice. Women who are single—either by choice or circumstance—are also quite often troubled by the pain they have caused their families. Many are reluctant to attend family events because they know they will be asked to justify their status once again, and, if older, know they are the subject of speculation and pity. *"Marriage and babies,"* a single friend once wryly observed, *"is my family's pastime."* Marriage is, without doubt, fundamental to the construction of wellbeing and sense of 'self' in Sri Lanka.

Marriage is also the central cultural performance of the middle-class. As I will discuss, for those families occupying the middle and upper strata of Sinhala society, marriage had always been a means through which status was asserted and consolidated. However, it is suddenly in the public eye like it has never been before. Within a few years into the new millennium marriage has been taken over by a 'wedding industry' at, what can only be described as, a dizzying pace. There are service providers specialising in bridal dressing to wedding photography, and offering wedding packages promising to take care of all the details. The commercial wedding has become a form of enchantment: dozens of glossy magazines and tabloids featuring alluring brides and extravagant 'five-star' wedding receptions are now published in Sinhala, English, and in a hybrid-format; lifestyle programmes focusing on the 'perfect' wedding and the 'modern' home seem to monopolise day-time television; and wedding fairs and shows are regular public events. 'Glamour' and 'romance' seems to be the central imagery of these weddings. Financial institutions offer personal loans that are specifically targeted at financing a wedding. At a macro-level these changes point to the inexorable impact of commercialisation and globalisation. The glamorous lifestyles of Colombo's elite have always been highly visible, but mostly inaccessible to the middle-classes in the past. The spread of a consumer culture has meant that previously unattainable lifestyles can now be imitated by an expanding middle-class. The commercial wedding, therefore, has become another means to publicly asserting status. At a micro-level, however, the commercial wedding places a spotlight on how the presentation of the 'self' is being significantly transformed through the process of consumption and assertion of lifestyle. The change I had observed from the simple demure bride of the previous generation to the desirable self-assured bride of the new generation was suggesting something about how the 'self' is structured through the material world it inhabits. It thus poses a question about how socio-economic processes are implicated in the production of gendered selves. Taken together, these changes reveal several layers of tensions: marriage as social obligation is being reconfigured as individual achievement; marriage customs and rituals that were defined and performed within a familial context is now being structured through the market; and marriage that was integral to social status is now signalling a globalised modernity.

The study of marriage was central to the early work of feminist anthropologists concerned with understanding the social reproduction of gender (c*f.* Ortner and Whitehead 1981; Reiter 1975; Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974). That cultural symbols and systems of meaning are not universal, but are produced through historical processes and also interpreted through social action was illustrated through the deconstruction of 'gender' and the analysis of 'marriage' and the interconnected institutions of 'family' and 'kinship' (*cf.* Carsten 2004a, b; Moore 1988; Ortner and Whitehead 1981; Yanagisako and Collier 1987). Feminist anthropologists argued that the category 'gender' is culturally and historically specific by showing how the social significance of biological differences between men and women had different meanings in various societies; they also illustrated the ways in which marriage, family, and kinship relations are shaped not only by 'culture', but also by the political economies of various societies. Yanagisako and Collier (1996), commenting on the early work of feminist anthropologists, explain the major re-orientation of thinking that this involved:

> many of us focused on marriage because it seemed to play a crucial role in subordinating wives to husbands by rendering alternatives to marriage untenable […] We asked how different forms of marriage encouraged different understandings of femininity and masculinity. *Instead of treating gender as the cause of marriage, we treated gender as its product* (p.236, *emphasis mine*)

As illustrated above, marriage is being profoundly transformed through the processes of social change. Marriage is, therefore, a privileged site through which to investigate how gendered identities are formed, experienced, and performed, and how they are reconfigured by social change.

The implications of social change for marriage and the production of 'modern' selves has become the subject of study in anthropology and the social sciences more generally. A set of intersecting questions frames the existing body of anthropological literature investigating the consequences of social transformation for marriage, family, and kinship in different regions of the world: How are marriage practices changing? What are their consequences for the underlying structure of gender, and also kinship,

relations? And, what is driving these changes? Implicit to the discussions about marriage and modernity is an important underlying question: how are people's shifting expectations of marital relations intertwined with changing conceptions about personhood and the 'self'? This is because the shift to companionate marriage as the ideal form of conjugality in Western Europe and North America is attendant to what is regarded as a profound cultural transformation—the development of the modern individual self (Collier 1997; Giddens 1992; Taylor 1989; Wardlow and Hirsch 2006). The companionate marriage ideal in underscoring choice, individual preference, and intimacy of the couple, suggests an expansion of individual agency in the domain of marriage.

My own questions build on these: How have marriage practices changed in Sri Lanka? What historical processes underline these changes? And, how are these changes entwined with shifting notions of the 'self'? At one level, the purpose of my project is to produce a miniature painting of social transformation in a specific historical and cultural context—the Sinhala-Buddhist urban middle-class in contemporary Sri Lanka. At another, I am interested in investigating how changes in marriage practices are producing different notions of gendered selves and gendered agency.

In order to answer these questions, I examine mainly women's but also men's narratives about marriage. Talking about marriage is a way of talking about the 'self' and reflecting on the meaning of being a social person (*cf.* Ahearn 2001a; Edwards 1990; Joseph 1999a, b). On the other hand, as mentioned before, to study marriage is a way of producing a miniature of social change. Hence, by focusing on marriage narratives, my study aims to understand how notions of the 'self' are constructed within and transformed by social, cultural, economic, and political contexts.

'Marriage' is also interwoven with various other themes including gender relations and household politics, fertility and reproduction, motherhood and bringing up children. It is important to note here that although these themes emerged in the narratives I examine, my study's principal focus is how people talked about getting married and described their own marriage and those of their family members.

A note on the significance of this project in the particular context of Sri Lanka

There has been no comprehensive study conducted on marriage in Sri Lanka following the classic village-based ethnographies on kinship and marriage of the mid-twentieth-century.[4] Jayawardena (2000) notes that since the late 1970s two major events have significantly shaped social science research in Sri Lanka. On the one hand, scholarship on Sri Lanka has been 'over-determined' by the ethnic conflict producing a substantive body of work on nationalism, identity politics, and ethnic violence. On the other hand, the influence of feminism and development studies has produced a vast body of literature on poverty and development issues, with an emphasis on women's concerns. Despite the focus on women, the gender and development literature on Sri Lanka has rarely analysed the meaning of marriage, family, and kinship in people's lives.[5] The emphasis on poverty has meant that the subjects of these discussions are usually the rural or urban poor (*cf.* Dias and Jayasundere 2004; Gamburd 2000; Kottegoda 2004; Waxler-Morrison 2004). When middle-class women appear in the discussion, it is their participation in the public sphere that is usually examined (*cf.* Gunawardena 2005; Wickramasinghe and Jayatilake 2006; Leitan 1990).

Marriage and family, however, are often implicated in the discussions about the poor. The family in these discussions is frequently portrayed as the receptacle of a range of social ills brought on by social change (Abeyasekera and Amarasuriya 2010). Conflict and migration, as well as substance abuse, child abuse and domestic violence, are seen to have irrevocably damaged the institutions of marriage and family. Women are often portrayed as victims who, in spite of what may seem like insurmountable difficulties manage to cope, displaying remarkable resilience in the way they ensure the survival of the family. As Amarasuriya and I (2010) observe, "a focus on how family and marriage are negatively affected by historical processes and social upheaval without a corresponding discussion on how individuals make meaning of their lives and relationships seems like only half the story" (p.120). For surely marriage, family, and

[4] *Cf.* Leach (1961); Obeyesekere (1967); Ryan (1958); Tambiah (1958 & 1965); Yalman (1967)

[5] The type of gender and development work that has been carried out in Sri Lanka can be broadly categorised into the following areas: increasing women's access to education; improving health care for women; increasing women's access to employment; increasing women's access to micro credit; consciousness raising; advocacy for improving women's rights; and increasing women's participation in the public sphere, especially with regard to political participation (Abeyasekera and Amarasuriya 2010).

kinship in Sri Lanka cannot simply be a narrative of suffering and victimisation?

Structure of the Thesis

This thesis presents the marriage histories of Sinhala-Buddhist families belonging to Colombo's middle-class. It details how marriage practices have changed from the early twentieth century to the present-day and highlights the way people, mainly women, present their selves through these narratives. The first chapter reviews the anthropological literature on marriage highlighting its key concepts, themes, and arguments. I draw mainly from the literature on South Asia with some references to East Asia, the Middle-East, and also the rest of the world. I then examine the literature on personhood in South Asia focusing specifically on how personhood is understood and expressed within the domain of marriage. I link these two bodies of literature to examine the way the 'gendered self' and the concept of women's agency have been discussed within the marriage literature.

Chapter Two describes the methodology used in the research. In this chapter I detail the participants, the process of collecting information, and the sources of data I use in my thesis. I review the literature on positionality and reflexivity to discuss how my role as an indigenous anthropologist influenced the trajectory of my fieldwork, and then examine the strengths, limitations, and challenges of doing ethnographic research as an 'insider'. I finally take up the ethical questions related to conducting fieldwork in one's own community.

In chapter three I establish the historical context of my research. I examine the Sinhalese caste structure and caste relations before moving on to the emergence of class as an important form of social stratification as a consequence of colonialism and capitalism. I review the historical literature on nationalism, class, and notions of respectability amongst the Sinhalese to examine how these intersected in constructing the ideal Sinhala woman—a concept that continues to influence the gendered norms and practices of the middle-class.

The next chapters—four to seven—present the findings of my research. In chapter four I describe the different types of Sinhala marriage and trace the changes that have been taking place in marriage practices from the seventeenth century onwards. I summarise how marriage has been represented in historical documents and early ethnographic records before moving on to presenting the marriage histories of my respondents. I then describe the customs and rituals of Sinhala-Buddhist marriage as practiced today. The aim of chapter four is to highlight how Sinhala marriage practices of the 'past' and 'present' do not neatly map onto what is thought to be 'traditional' and what is asserted as 'modern' thereby blurring the distinctions between these categories. In chapter five I examine the key features of contemporary marriage practices in detail and analyse the way they are presented by the younger generation as being 'different' to those of the previous generation. I look at how 'love' marriages, or what I term 'self-choice' marriages, have become the norm amongst urban middle-class families, and constitute a way of presenting the family as 'modern' and 'progressive'. By analysing how 'choices' continued to □□ □ □d□ □ □□□□ a relational context, I consider in chapter five how people negotiate marriage is reflected in the way people talk about 'choosing' a marriage partner. In chapter six I analyse the relationship between marriage and social mobility and its relationship to caste and class considerations in middle-class families. By examining the way caste and class feature in people's accounts of marriage I draw attention to how marriage contributes to the production of 'difference' in society and reproduces class. The objective of this chapter is to illustrate how middle-class families' preoccupation with social mobility and asserting distinction means that people's 'choices' about who they will marry are structured by caste and class. In chapter seven I analyse a different set of narratives about marriage—those of women who described their marriages as 'failures' and also those of unmarried people. I analyse whether the trope of agency is asserted when women make 'wrong' choices and do not conform to social norms and expectations. In presenting women's stories that draw on 'fate' and 'circumstance' as ways of explaining their lives, I illustrate in chapter seven how the emphasis on a 'modern agentic self' is, in fact, contingent on the context they are deployed.

Contemporary narratives about marriage in Sri Lanka appear to suggest that 'modernity' has reconstituted the person to produce a 'modern individual self' who, less constrained by collective expectations, can exercise choice in marriage. A closer look in fact points to a 'relational self' still embedded within family and kinship. My findings illustrate that there is a collective investment in the idea of the 'choosing person' as a way of presenting the family as 'modern' and 'progressive'. At the same time, the 'choosing person' is produced through narratives that emphasise agency as a responsibility that must be exercised with caution if people are to make the 'right' choices, indicating how people continue to be accountable to family and kin in the domain of marriage.

1 – Marriage, Modernity, and the Choosing Person

A Review of the Literature

1. Introduction

'Modernity', as evoked by the vignette in the introductory chapter, is associated with a significant reconfiguration of social relations and customary practices in the institutions of marriage, family, and kinship in the social science literature (*cf.* Carsten 2004a; Collier 1997; Engels 1884/2010; Giddens 1992; Jackson 2012b; Moore 1988; Rapp et al 1979; Taylor 1989; Thornton and Fricke 1987). Even though scholars studying marriage are explicit in their assertion that modernisation neither produces uniform outcomes nor linear change, the anthropological study of marriage, when taken as a whole, nevertheless implicitly points to a significant shift towards similar marriage ideals and practices in all major regions of the world including East Asia (Edwards 1990; Kendall 1996; Koike 2003; Murray-Li 1998); South Asia (Ahearn 2001a; Donner 2002 & 2008; Fuller and Narasimhan 2008; Grover 2009; Mody 2008; Osella and Osella 2000a; Caroline Osella 2012; Lindberg 2009; Parry 2001; White 2013); the Middle-East and North Africa (Abu-Lughod 1990; Altorki 1977); Africa (Jackson 2012a,b; Mann 1985; Obbo 1987; Oppong 1974), South America (Hirsch 2003; Rebhun 1999), the United Kingdom and Europe (Carsten 2004a; Collier 1997; Giddens 1992), and the USA (Illouz 1997). According to the literature, companionate marriage based on affective bonds, emotional intimacy, and sexual pleasure has become the ideal model for marital relations. With more emphasis being placed on conjugality over social obligation and loyalty to kin, marriage is being imagined as a union of two persons rather than a strategic alliance between two families for economic security. In tandem, family structures are changing from various traditional configurations to more nuclear forms, and customary rules of kinship that governed the arrangement of marriage are being modified and discarded in favour of what is often glossed as 'love' marriages that are based on the ideals of romantic love and individual preference. In

fact, choice and individual preference have become central to people's narratives about marriage.

In 'textbook' definitions, the advent of 'modernity' is linked with the enlightenment and industrialisation, and 'modernisation' refers to the transformation of societies from feudalism to capitalism through the ideals of rationalism and secularism, and a belief in human freedom and progress. Anthropologists and others have been critical of the tendency within the social sciences for assuming 'modernity' as teleological, and for predicting modernisation to be a homogenising process whereby Euro-American socio-economic and cultural development is replicated by the rest of the world. Instead, several scholars drew attention to a seeming 'paradox' of modernity because the spread of capitalism and a global media culture in the late twentieth century went hand-in-hand with the proliferation of ethnic differences and ethnic conflict (Appadurai 1990; Tambiah 1989). Collier (1997) argues that "homogenisation and differentiation have occurred simultaneously, as self-consciously 'modern' peoples have sought to reclaim [their] cultural heritages" (pp.195-196). More recently many have argued for analysing modernity in its plural form—'modernities' that are 'relative', 'alternative', 'regional', and 'multiple' (*cf.* Deeb 2006; Gupta 2003; Knauft 2002; Mahmood 2005; Sivaramakrishnan and Agrawal 2003). As Deeb (2006) notes, these debates are not just "academic fashion" but reflect how "being 'modern' is a deeply salient issue" for 'ordinary' people (p.15). She asserts that "people draw from many different discourses about being modern" which are then deployed variously in different contexts (ibid). Hence, rather than stopping at documenting local understandings of what it means to be modern, Deeb believes that a more interesting investigation arises from exploring how people experience, interpret, and understand the concept.

'Modernity' is evoked but rarely defined in the marriage literature. Attention is paid instead to the the *shift* from 'tradition' to 'modernity' occurring in what I see as three interconnected domains: in the *symbolic* domain where customs and rituals associated with marriage are changing through the modification of the 'old' and the adoption of the 'new'; in the *relational* domain where the hierarchical structure of relations

between gender and generation are shifting towards seemingly more egalitarian forms; and in the *personal* domain in the way people are imagining themselves not as blind followers of convention but as actors capable of making choices for themselves. Accounts of transformation are rich in detail and point to modernity as a variegated process. Nevertheless, implicit in some of these accounts is an assumption that marriage is in transition and is moving towards a model that is tacitly compared to an 'ideal type'.

I begin this chapter with an examination of how the concepts of 'tradition' and 'modernity' frame the discussion on changing marriage practices. In analysing how these concepts are used in the literature, my aim is to unravel what are two types of narratives. The first is akin to a kind of 'grand' narrative that suggests an endogenous process, which takes a sweeping look at history in narrating a story about the present in relation to a past (Hobsbawm 1972). The second is more localised narratives about change that show the categories 'tradition' and 'modernity' as being inadequate in explaining the complexity of change; that changes in people's behaviour are as much shaped by macro-level transformation as it is by the specificity of the context in which change takes place. I then link these accounts about marriage to a similar pattern of diverging narratives about personhood in South Asia and the 'East': the debate about a relational self embedded in kinship and family that stand in opposition to an individual autonomous self. Within the anthropological literature on personhood too there is a strong critique of theories that posit dichotomous and universal categories in describing persons without taking into consideration how people act is shaped by the context in which the action takes place. I link the two discussions on marriage and personhood to question the assumption that 'modernity' is producing similar kinds of selves in various parts of the world. I will suggest that we interrogate more thoroughly narratives about marriage that appear to suggest 'modernity' as inevitable; that its processes are reconstituting the person who, less constrained by 'tradition' and collective expectations, is now experiencing greater freedom in the domain of marriage. Instead, I will argue that it is important to read more carefully the localised narratives that illustrate how various processes like nationalism, class formation, and religious reform are shaping marriage practices, gender identities, and social relations

in particular ways, producing different persons in different contexts.

2. Modernity, Companionate Marriage, and the Individual Self

The shift from 'tradition' to 'modernity' is the broad framework through which changes to marriage and family that took place in Western Europe and North America are narrated in social science literature. The shift to companionate marriage from an ideal depicted in the arts to actual practice is dated variously between the mid-18th century and the early 20th century (Giddens 1992; Taylor 1989; Padilla et al 2007; Wardlow and Hirsch 2006). According to Wardlow and Hirsch (2006) urbanization and wage labour spread the ideal of a nuclear family by reducing people's dependence on parents and extended family. The 'privacy' and interdependence of the conjugal unit that is said to have happened concurrently is, of course, a result of the constitution of the public/private divide in modern European societies that positioned the family within the 'private sphere' (Engels 1884/2010). The decline in infant mortality and fertility and the increase in adult life expectancy meant that families had fewer children and more time alone as a couple, resulting in the need to cultivate intimacy (Wardlow and Hirsch 2006, p.8). Padilla et al (2007) argue that the "intersection of love and modernity" is partly a consequence of "historical fact":

> In 19th-century Western Europe and North America, demographic and economic factors […] created the conditions within which marriage increasingly became viewed as an arena of self-realisation and pleasure rather than a strategy for survival, social reproduction, and fulfilment of kin obligations (p.xvii).

Taylor (1989) points out that the advent of modernity and capitalism significantly transformed social values in Western Europe and North America. He argues how the valuation of commerce replaced an aristocratic warrior ethic with a bourgeoisie ethic that affirmed ordinary life, emphasized production, and valued an orderly life centred on family and home.

Historical narratives about Western Europe and North America are then universalised in analysing changes in the global south. Padilla et al (2007) link modernisation,

capitalism, and now globalisation to the emergence of 'love' as an important sentiment in marriage. Wardlow and Hirsch (2006) argue that the shift from family-based agriculture work to wage labour has been critical to the growing prominence of companionate marriage ideals across the world. They also link its growing popularity to development processes like greater access to formal education, the spread of Christianity, family planning, and increased commodity consumption. According to Hirsch (2003) development and concomitant ideas about progress and social mobility are intertwined with the ideal of companionate marriage in many communities.

Defining 'Companionate Marriage'

What are then the principle characteristics of modern companionate marriage? How is the 'ideal type' set up in the literature as a way of comparing with what was before, and also in analysing changes in the rest of the world? Wardlow and Hirsch (2006) define companionate marriage as the marital ideal in which emotional closeness between spouses is "understood to be both one of the primary measure of success in marriage and a central practice through which the relationship is constituted and reinforced" (p.4). Taylor (1989) argues that sentiment is intrinsic to modern values and was reflected in the way marriage "based on affection, true companionship between husband and wife, and devoted concern for the children" became idealised by the middle-class groups of North America (p.289). Taylor (1989) notes that the centrality given to sentiment did not mean that 'affection' in marriage is a modern invention, rather that it acquired a sense of importance at this time (p.292). Rebhun (1999) points out that the primacy of sentiment in marriage is often presented as 'romantic love'—and is used to suggest passionate desire in sexual relationships. Indeed, not just sexual intimacy but pleasure is considered a critical component of the marital bond and is thought to contribute to its endurance (Giddens 1992; Hirsch 2003). A marriage based on love, therefore, "is chosen, deeply felt, 'authentic', and profoundly personal" (Padilla et al 2007, p.xv).

Although sometimes used inter-changeably in the literature, it is important to briefly note here the difference between 'companionate marriage' and 'romantic love.' In

pre-modern Europe, according to Giddens (1992), a contrast was drawn "between the 'chaste' sexuality of marriage and the erotic or passionate character of extra-marital affairs" (p.39). He argues that romantic love was gradually absorbed into the institution of marriage through Christian moral values that conceived a "mystical unity" between husbands and wives as an aspect of one's devotion to God (p.39). Giddens is referring here to the courtly love tradition of the aristocracy, which he suggests was transformed through Christianity and gradually percolated to the middle classes and others.[6] In contrast, today, romantic love is associated with mutual attraction between potential partners and forms the basis of individual choice when selecting a spouse (Wardlow and Hirsch 2006). Romantic love is also said to be devoid of deliberation and is associated with "immediate attraction," an "intuitive grasp of another's qualities," and their potential to make one's life "complete" (Giddens 1992, p.40). Commenting on contemporary understandings of romantic love, Wardlow and Hirsch (2006) point out that while couples hoped that romantic sentiments would persist throughout married life, privileging romantic love when choosing a spouse is different from prioritising "the affective primacy of the conjugal unit" over the competing economic and emotional claims of kin (p.3). This difference is critical in appreciating people's attachment to family and in understanding how people negotiate between contending loyalties in managing their various relationships of affect.

Taylor (1989) argues that because companionate marriages demanded a high degree of emotional and personal commitment, there was an emphasis that such marriages should be entered into voluntarily. Such a shift is said to have resulted in the decline of the power parents and kin had over the choice of marriage partner and recast marriage as a contractual agreement between two people (p.290). Companionate marriage, therefore, was extricated, at least in principle, from considerations of economic security, duty and responsibility towards kin, and social obligation of reproduction, resulting in the conjugal relationship being given primacy over kinship

[6] Giddens (1992) asserts that "the precept that one should devote oneself to God in order to know him, and that through this process self-knowledge is achieved, became part of a mystical unity between man and woman. The temporary idealisation of the other typical of passionate love here was joined to a more permanent involvement with the love object" (p.39).

ties (Giddens 1992; Padilla et al 2007; Wardlow and Hirsch 2006). Taylor (1989) further posits that companionate marriage and the demand for privacy from both the extended family and the community occurred simultaneously. Privacy was important, according to Taylor, because marriage based on affection and affinity rather than dynastic or property considerations could only flourish in intimacy.[7] These accounts suggest that the companionate marriage ideal was a necessary attendant to the emergence of the nuclear family in modern Europe. As a consequence of a change in the economic organisation of societies from collective agriculture work to wage labour, the locus of control in matters of marriage and family shifted from kinship to the state and market.

Giddens (1992) uses the term "pure relationship" to refer to an ideal of the romantic relationship of late modernity, which is "entered into for its own sake" and is disconnected from obligation to kin, social reproduction, complementary labour and the need for economic security (p.58). For Giddens such a relationship suggests the possibility of democracy especially in the personal lives of women because "it is continued only in so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfactions for each individual to stay within it" (ibid). Giddens' view has been heavily critiqued for its transactional and ego-centric view of relationships (Jamieson 1999) and for reproducing 'modern' ideologies about an all-powerful self (Craib 1998).

What is critical to note here is the way in which such narratives about 'tradition' and 'modernity' suggest in a rather persistent and powerful way that people are moving away from calcified and constricting structures towards something denoting freedom. Personal choice and individual satisfaction are read as central to modern marriage creating a link between modernity, the ideals of romantic love and companionate marriage, and the concept of individual agency.

[7] Taylor is silent about the introduction of family laws at this time, which brought the family and the relationships and activities associated with it, i.e., reproduction, divorce, and inheritance, under the State's jurisdiction.

Choosing Persons and Individual Selves

Taylor (1989) links the emergence of the modern conception of the 'self' to certain broad movements occurring in the West during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: new valuation of commerce and bourgeois values replacing the aristocratic warrior ethic; the rise of the novel; changing notions of marriage and family; and the importance given to sentiment in people's social relations. The three major facets of modern identity are, according to Taylor: the idea of a 'self' embedded within the person, which is characterised by a quality of inwardness and a sense of the self's inner depths; an affirmation of ordinary life, which underlined the values of the emerging bourgeoisie; and the notion of nature as a moral source. Taylor argues that the shift to individualisation and internalisation combined with the significance given to ordinary life contributed to the understanding that relationships were central to human fulfilment and the idealisation of marriage as a form of 'true companionship'.

The marriage literature demonstrates that notions of 'individuality' and 'inner' feelings are critical to contemporary understandings and expectations of marriage. Wardlow and Hirsch (2006), speaking in general about romantic love and companionate marriage, assert that the "mutual recognition of individuality, and the intimacy created through it, is thought to provide the substance that will sustain the romantic relationship" (p.15). According to them, courtship practices, for example, have been significantly influenced by these ideas. Modern courtship is about appreciating the uniqueness of one's partner—their tastes, preferences, style, and interests—and finding out whether they are compatible with one's own (Wardlow and Hirsch 2006, pp.14-15). In discussing changing courtship practices in Andalucía, Collier (1997) observes how in the 1980s, as compared with the 1960s, courtship was imagined as a time in which "[modern] couples had to be left alone to explore and develop their feelings for one another […] and decide [if] they truly loved one another" (p.105). Giddens (1992), speaking of romantic relationships of late modernity, asserts that such a sense of the 'self' as unique is part of the complex interweaving of 'modern' ideas about romantic love and the individual self and people's experience of freedom and self-realisation (pp.39-40). Interestingly, Taylor (1989) argues that the changing notion

of the 'self' is captured in the modern novel. The romantic novel that appeared in the 18th century, according to Taylor, affirmed ordinary life and portrayed the subject as temporally placed in contrast to the tragedies of earlier times whose characters represented universal archetypes. He notes that a new sense of existing in time led to the objectification of time and changed how the subject was conceptualised. The modern 'self' therefore, "is constituted in memory" and "can only find an identity in self-narration" (Taylor 1989, p.289). Giddens (1992) concurs that romantic love contributed to the production of personal narratives about the 'self,' and emphasised the reflexive subject.

A Proviso

In the preceding sections I have tried to assemble the 'ideal type' for modern companionate marriage that is used sometimes to seamlessly link historical developments in the 'West' to changes taking place in the historical present in various parts of the world. Because the ideal of companionate marriage is attendant to the 'modern self', I provided a brief description in order to show how notions of individualisation, personal choice, and agency are central to both the 'modern self' and 'modern marriage.' Hence, when read together, narratives about marriage and the 'self' imply that 'modernity' has reconstituted the person who, less constrained by 'tradition' and collective expectations, experiences greater freedom in the domain of marriage and family.

Foucault (1978) in *History of Sexuality* presents a powerful critique of such assertions by pointing out that the organisation of the bourgeois family in the nineteenth century became the site where the most rigorous techniques of power were exercised by requiring people to 'confess' their sexual desires. In constructing sexuality as a locus of power, Foucault asserts that modernity did not bring sexual freedom but incited people to discourse through narratives of the 'self'. Rose (1996) too is critical of what he calls the 'regime of the self' and argues that 'individuality and 'individualism' cannot simply be read as key events in the transition to modernity. His 'genealogy of subjectification' challenges the tendency to assume the 'modern unitary self' as

somehow more 'authentic' by illustrating how the "individualised, interiorised, totalised, and psychologised understanding of what it is to be human" derives from "a number of contingent and altogether less refined and dignified practices and processes" (p.23). Craib (1994) critiques Giddens specifically for uncritically accepting the 'modern self' characterised by freedom and autonomy as a 'good thing'. Craib argues that to do is to ignore how the notion of a coherent and all-powerful 'self' is a 'false self' and prescribes "an illusory way of living" (p.112).

Collier (1997), writing about changing marriage practices in Andalucía, is deeply "sceptical of narratives that portray recent history as a saga of loosening constraints" (p.6). She argues that wage labour, with its focus on individual achievement and consumption as markers of success, has influenced the way people think about the marital relationship and reshaped people's attitudes towards intimate relations. Collier shows how in Andalucía people's understanding of how property is acquired has had a profound impact on how people think about marriage. When the emphasis was on inheriting from parents and passing on to children, marriage was envisioned as one between co-owners; in contrast, within the capitalist system marriage is imagined as "a union of a breadwinner and a homemaker who worked together to create a home for themselves and their children" (p.116). Collier asserts that although it seemed that young people were doing what they wanted to do rather than following what was expected of them, modern and seemingly 'normal' customs were as strongly socially enforced by an individualising market economy as were traditional customs by family and kin.

Part of the problem is how the assertion of modernity is entrenched in everyday conversations and is a characteristic of the way people everywhere situate themselves in relation to a past (Hobsbawm 1972). Collier (1997), for example, notes that even as she tried to avoid these categories in her analysis, she found herself unwittingly "reinforcing the contrast between 'tradition' and 'modernity'" (p.10). Collier argues that in attempting to use "substitute terms [she] found herself reproducing the problematic 'tradition' and 'modernity' contrast, reinforcing the vision of tradition as modernity's devalued opposite" (ibid). She notes that part of the problem is that such

contrasts are typically found in people's everyday narrative accounts of marriage and social change. Hirsch (2003) observes □□□□the prestige that is assigned to modernity andthe belief in the possibility of progress are part of habitual thought and assumptionsthat are made; that there is a tendency to "accept without questioning that to describesomething as modern means to suggest that it is superior to what has gone before" (p.13). Grossberg (1996), commenting on the construction of modern identities,asserts that the logic of the modern identity is that it is "always constituted out ofdifference" (p.93). Modernity's 'other', according to Grossberg, is "usually tradition asa temporal other or spatial others transformed into temporal others" (ibid).

3. 'Love Marriage' and Agency – Perspectives from South Asia and beyond

A shift away from 'traditional' forms of marriage, family arrangements, and kinship relations toward more 'modern' configurations is the broad framework through which change is narrated within the South Asian literature on marriage. Fuller and Narasimhan (2008), for example, note how in a Brahmin community in South India close-kin marriages arranged by parents when their children were young is no longer the norm. Young people's preferences are now being taken into consideration when arranging marriage, and, in some cases, young people have become actively involved, albeit behind the scenes, in arranging their own marriages. They argue that while "arranged, endogamous marriage still remains the norm […] young people's] potential happiness as congenial partners [has] become [one of] the principal criteria for selection" (p.737). Ahearn (2001a) illustrates how notions of agency, love, and development are interwoven in love letters written by young people in Nepal who are conceptualising love as empowering and enabling success in life (p.151). Both the act of writing and the content of letters, argues Ahearn, point to changing understandings of young women's sense of agency and the efficacy of their actions (p.247). In Calcutta, Donner (2008) describes how middle-class women feel a greater sense of agency within the nuclear family because of the control they have over consumption and lifestyles choices and their engagement with modern parenting, especially their

involvement in their children's education.[8] Taken together these changes are interpreted by many as suggesting more room for manoeuvre in negotiating between the expectations of the collective and individual desire, especially for women. A closer reading, as I will show, points to contradictions and ambivalence in living the ideal of companionate marriage.

The recent scholarship on marriage in South Asia has been critical of older anthropological accounts that tended to use a dichotomous model in conceptualising marriage practices in South Asia: 'arranged' denoting marriages decided by parents and kin on behalf of children, and 'love' representing marriages that are initiated by children without parental consent. Donner (2002) argues that such a contrast does not take into consideration how these categories are deliberately produced and continuously reworked in family's narrating history. Citing evidence of love-marriages among Bengali families in the past and present, Donner shows how people often downplay their agency when making choices in order not to disrupt the structure of kinship relations. As joint families continue to be the norm, both parents and children, according to Donner, "have a strong interest in 'normalising' the relationship between affines" and, therefore, "agree that the best way to deal with love marriages is to treat them as if they were arranged marriages (p.88). Mody (2008) discusses how parents in New Delhi choreograph an elaborate charade by coaching 'inappropriate' spouses in the right behaviour and appropriate dress in order to present a picture of "coherence and order" to the wider social network (p.157). De Munck (1996) shows how in a rural Muslim community in Sri Lanka 'love marriages' are socially constructed in ways that make it compatible with the culturally preferred arranged marriage model both in the past and present. Grover (2009) draws attention to general assumptions made in the sub-continental literature about arranged marriages being more stable than love marriages because they are supported by family and community. She points out that this does not necessarily hold true in low-income and slum communities in New Delhi. Grover argues that women in arranged marriages who have more access to natal

[8] *Cf.* Altorki (1977) notes how, women from elite Saudi families, influenced by education and overseas travel, gained control over the family budget, which was historically managed by mothers-in-law, when their desire for nuclear residence was realised.

support structures tend to seek refuge in their natal homes in the event of marital conflict, which can lead to marital breakdown. On the other hand, women in love marriages who have less support, tend to have more stable marital lives. Caroline Osella (2012) asserts that love marriages across South Asia are "continuous with older forms of marriage even though it is part of a contemporary re-shaping of conjugal expectations (p.244). Hence, she argues for discarding the "'arranged' versus 'love' dichotomy" both as a way of describing empirical evidence as well as an analytic because "all marriages across all social classes involve a mix of practical-pragmatic, economic and affectual-passionate considerations and forces" (p.244).

3.1. 'Modern' Conjugality - some Contradictions

The difficulty in using dichotomous models to understand social change is also reflected by scholars who note how the shift towards conjugality and 'modern' marriage practices often had contradictory outcomes for women. Parry (2001) notes how in Chhattisgarh India, in contrast to Giddens' definition of the 'pure relationship' that can be terminated when it no longer meets the needs of the individuals concerned, there is a new stress on the 'indissolubility' of romantic relationships. The emphasis on stability, argues, Parry, has led to the limiting of men's and especially women's autonomy about staying married as well as their choice of spouse (p.817). Moreover, the emphasis on modern conjugality, Parry shows, has also undermined the practice of secondary marriages where people were "permitted a more meaningful autonomy" (p.817). Parry's point about the contemporary stress on the permanence of modern romantic relationships is important because it draws attention to how romance and conjugality are differently interpreted in South Asia and elsewhere.

A great deal has been said about how the shift toward companionate marriage is transforming the structure of gender relations between husbands and wives. However, although most scholars acknowledge the wider implications to kinship relations, not much has been said about how it affects the relations of power between older and younger generations. Observing the changing landscape of the crowds that throng Calicut beach on weekends for leisure, Caroline Osella (2012), in her study of a

matrilineal Muslim community in South India, comments on how the nuclear family has displaced the matrilineal family characterised by large women-only groups chaperoned by older women. Such shifts in the structure of authority in kinship relations implies significant changes in how older women in South Asia historically exercised power. In relation to Bangladesh in the mid 1980s, White (1992) asserts that women usually wielded power in interpersonal ways and within a relational dimension. She notes how women gain more and more centrality in the household as they transition from wives to mothers and eventually to mothers-in-law (p.140). In light of what Osella (2012) observes about the increasing centrality □□□□□ nuclear family and the conjugal bond, women's traditional domains of power that White describes seem to be changing quite significantly. In the context of South India, Osella (2012) argues that older women's loss of influence and power did not mean a gain in power for younger women. In fact, she argues, the nuclearisation of the family combined with the new Islamic ideology has led to greater restrictions on women's mobility.

Moreover, Osella notes that male migration to the Middle-East has meant an importation of modern Islamic ideology, which promotes the nuclear family as the ideal family form. Osella argues that the emphasis on conjugal intimacy is breaking down bonds between women and their kin by undermining matrilineal extended family structures that had produced homo-social intimacy among women through a rich network of affective relationships. Furthermore, the shift towards conjugality ha□ reconfigured and narrowed men's sexual identities as well because the neo-patriarchal household modelled on modern Islamic values demands "performances of impeccable heterosexuality and masculinity" (p.12). The desire for the 'modern' is, therefore, according to Osella and Osella (2000a, b), intermingled with ambivalence because it has contracted those spaces where men and women experienced intimacy, pleasure, and emotional support through other forms of sociality. The ambivalence that women feel towards modern conjugality is also noted by Donner (2008) for Bengali women; she argues that "affective attachment and intimate recognition" in marriage, while integral to the making of modern selves also produces anxieties in the way it presents marriage "as the only option within which legitimate

sexual relations and motherhood could be fulfilled" (p.64).[9]

The marriage literature also highlights how even though gender relations between husbands and wives may not be as hierarchical as they were before, women's lives continued to be structured by 'traditional' gender roles and norms. The persistence of conventional gender ideologies is clearly evident in modern courtship practices in Nepal. Ahearn (2001a) argues that while young women's writing love-letters demonstrates their increasing sense of agency when compared to the past when they had very little say in who they married, gender ideologies were maintained in the way men always initiated action while women only had the power to consent or object. Furthermore, she argues that while eloping couples "often depict themselves as agents weighing their various options, many still attribute their elopements to coercion and fate" (p.114). Rebhun (1999) shows how even though women in Northeast Brazil were free to explore their feelings towards their partners during courtship they also had to safeguard their chastity and uphold family honour. Collier (1997) notes that in Andalucía, women have to resolve the tension between remaining a virgin until marriage to avoid the risk of undermining future marriage prospects and demonstrating love by succumbing without consideration for the costs involved. In the South Asian marriage literature, the discussion on romantic love and courtship is mostly silent about the subject of sexual intimacy between couples. Perhaps this is because pre-marital sexual intimacy is taboo and is often avoided as a topic of discussion. In her study of sexuality among unmarried university students in Sri Lanka, Ruwanpura (2010) reveals how women have to carefully navigate between their own sexual desires and men's expectations of sexual intimacy while also upholding social norms that demand women remain chaste until marriage.

[9] The marriage literature from Africa also records such ambivalence toward conjugality. For example, Parkin and Nyamwaya (1987), commenting in general about women from elite African families in the colonial period, argue that they tended to prefer plural marriages, despite the status associated with Christian marriage, because they found more personal autonomy within such an arrangement. Oppong (1974) in her study of middle-class marriage in urban Ghana shows how women, although desiring conjugality, were nevertheless reluctant to pool their resources with their husbands because of men's obligations to their kin. Jackson (2012), however, commenting on more contemporary trends in Zimbabwe, argues that for many groups of African women the emphasis on conjugality allowed for "greater room for the exercise of agency" in household decision-making because it allowed them to detach themselves from the control of their fathers (p.4).

Commenting on the South Asian literature on marriage as a whole, White (2013) points to the parallel existence of one set of writing that highlights greater agency in marriage with the "shadow-side literature on dowry which stresses immiserisation, coercive demand, and many forms of violence against women" (p.1). Such conflicting narratives about marriage suggest, on the one hand, that claims of increasing agency in South Asia must be read with caution. On the other hand, White rejects a conventional reading of such contradictions as the persistence of oppressive tradition in tandem with modern ideals. Dowry, White points out, was traditionally practiced exclusively amongst high-caste Hindus, but has spread to other communities in India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan as a result of modernisation.[10] White further argues that the "expansion and inflation" of dowry payments from the mid-twentieth century onwards is a direct consequence of young men's need for resources to establish themselves within the modern economy, which is supported by families in their demand for higher dowries (p.1). Therefore, modernity, in this instance, has increased women's vulnerability in marriage and constrained their choices.

The evidence presented here clearly illustrates how changes to marriage have both expanded cultural repertoires and choices at the same it foreclosed traditional spaces of manoeuvre. These various local narratives highlight how the desire for the 'modern' must be read alongside its contradictory outcomes in women's lives. Moreover, as I will show for Sri Lanka, the implication of a more nuanced reading of local versions of romance and conjugality on people's choices reveal how people experiences of agency are also different and varied. In fact, it is the tension between the assertion of choice and agency as denoting modernity and the constraints on choice and agency that the reality of modern life places on people that I wish to explore in my thesis.

3.2. Marriage and Social Mobility – Collective Expectations

Marriage continues to be one of the most important strategies for social mobility in South Asia, especially amongst middle-class families. As White (2013) points out it is "the most striking challenge to marriage as 'pure relationship'" (p.3). Indeed, families'

[10] *Cf.* Caplan 1984

collective preoccupation with getting ahead and asserting status seems to undermine the romantic ideal of appreciating the individual regardless of economic concerns and social ambitions. Ahearn (2001a), however, shows that for young Nepali women, influenced by the rhetoric of development and progress, 'love' and 'life-success' are two elements of the same thing. Fuller and Narasimhan (2008) note how for the Vattima Brahmins the comparable educational qualifications of the bride and groom has become an important consideration when arranging marriage because both parents and children see these as critical for "congenial couples" and "happy marriages" (p.746). They argue that education qualifications and career prospects are now taking precedence over 'older' considerations of family background and reputation because they are critical to maintaining status in the contemporary context. Osella and Osella (2000a) demonstrate how for the low-caste Izhava community in Kerala, marriage is a principal means through which families accumulate prestige and wealth for the purpose of shedding their 'low caste' status and getting ahead. Excessive dowry payments, therefore, demonstrate "how much a family is prepared and able to invest in the fulfilment of status aspirations" (p.100), and extravagant weddings offer a "once in a lifetime chance" to build and show symbolic capital (p.102). The evidence clearly indicates how marriage is implicated in the production of difference and reproduction of class—a discussion I will take up in detail in chapter three.

Marriage as a means to social mobility has meant that parents and kin continue to play a central role in selecting marriage partners for the younger generation. Caplan (1998) argues that amongst the Anglo-Indian community in Madras the emphasis on 'free choice' in marriage belies concerns with social mobility and status. He shows that Anglo-Indian parents have always had a "significant influence over the outcomes" of the choices their children make (p.22). In fact, Caplan argues that in the contemporary context the community's aspirations for enhancing their status has resulted in parents becoming more involved in marriage negotiations.

Much of the marriage literature tends to assume that it is the older generation who are concerned with protecting the family's reputation and status; that young people

are not strategic in their choices about maintaining and even enhancing economic and social capital for their future welfare and realisation of potential. In her study of love marriage in Delhi, Mody (2008) shows how even couples who seem to be discarding consideration for their family's status by finding partners from outside of their caste-group in fact emphasise their social compatibility—i.e., education, class, career prospects, and similar 'thinking'—to demonstrate to their parents the suitability of their choices.

Young people's emphasis on class and other status markers points to an ambivalence towards love as the only basis for marriage. The emergence of hybrid forms—"arranged- love marriage" (Uberoi 2008) or "love-cum-arranged marriage" (Mody 2008)—rather than only indicating young people's increasing agency in marriage, also points to negotiation and compromise between the generations. As evidenced here and as I will show for Sri Lanka, 'choices' are always made in the context of relationships, and, therefore, are not exclusively shaped by personal desires, but also by the expectation of others. The way in which young people give in to their parents as much as they assert their desires is critical to understanding how the assertion of individual agency gets translated in everyday practice.

3.3. The Question of 'Agency'

Narratives about marriage from various parts of the world reveal how choice is fundamental to relationships structured around romantic love and the companionate marriage ideal. While scholars note the various constraints to people's assertion of agency, many corroborate with people's narratives by accepting that the discarding of 'traditional' practices in favour of 'modern' ones has expanded the spaces available for women in particular to manoeuvre between collective expectations and individual desires. Collier (1997) is deeply sceptical of taking what people say at face value and instead analyses the concepts the younger generation in Andalucía use to talk about the past and present as a conceptual tool for exploring the development of 'modern subjectivity' (p.5). Collier argues that the contrast young people drew between "thinking for oneself" as opposed to their parents who "let others think for one" did

not imply that people were now more willing to act out their inner desires than before; rather, it signalled a change in the "concepts and practices people used for managing their presentations of self" (p.6). Collier provides an important analytical tool with which to interrogate people's narratives about choice as a way of presenting a 'modern' self.

Mody (2008) is critical of the way agency is depicted in the marriage literature. She points out that agency is often interpreted as a combination of freedom and efficacy, "without the all-important counterpart of accountability" (p.158). She argues that people are always accountable to family, kin, and community; therefore, people's actions cannot be "unmediated acts of 'individuality', but are simultaneously actions of persons-as-accountable to groups [to which] they are assumed to belong" (ibid). In "love-cum arranged marriages," Mody argues, the couple's choice is accepted by the families, but their agency is "domesticated and brought within the purview of parental authority and control and the reciprocal obligations of the child" (p.194). In the case of love-marriages, on the other hand, although young people are aware of their ability to act, their actions are always moderated by accountability to the community and "driven by the needs and exigencies of their social relationships" (ibid). Mody illustrates this important point by unravelling the complex stories of elopement and abduction that accompany narratives about love marriages. In doing so, she uncovers a 'paradox' where women create victimhood through elaborate stories of abduction to conceal agency for multiple reasons: to "stave off disapproval and condemnation" (p.193); protect their family's honour; and also deflect blame away from their partners. Mody asserts that

> the singular intentionality that the word 'agency' assumes is deeply antithetical to the ways in which most people actually conduct their lives […] How people act are never clear-cut demonstrations of individual will nor a rejection of corporate values, but rather comprises a careful and deliberate calculus of action (ibid) .

Mody's emphasis on 'deliberation' suggests that in this context both men and women are aware of their own interests and act with an end-goal in mind. Ortner (2001) in her delineation of agency is critical of specifying the concept in this way. She argues that

to understand people's actions is to recognize that "the mediation between conscious intention and embodied habituses […]between historically marked individuals and events on the one hand, and the cumulative reproductions and transformations that are the results of everyday practices on the other" (p.77). Strathern (1987) argues that while it is important to understand the cultural origins of individual motivation, one cannot assume that an individual actor is one who knows his/her interests. She asserts the importance of understanding people's actions in a relational context by posing a series of questions: "how are people seen to impinge upon one another; how are they affected by others? Are persons the authors of their own acts? Or do they derive their efficacy from others?" (p.23). In her discussion of Melanesia, Strathern points out that although people act independently, their aims may not necessarily be conceived of independently. She argues that "one does not act necessarily *for* the self, any more than the self is necessarily the source of the act's effectiveness" (pp.22-23 *emphasis in original*).

The inter-dependent nature of people's actions and their sense of accountability are critical to understanding agency in the South Asian context. It calls into question the way in which choice and the expansion of agency is presumed to be experienced by 'modern' individuals. There is an underlying assumption in much of the marriage literature that exercising choice in marriage denotes greater freedom from constraints of the past. However, as I will show for Sri Lanka, narratives about choice must be carefully scrutinized to understand whether people in fact describe the experience of having greater agency in marriage as freedom.

The Market and Sexualised Selves

Abu-Lughod (1990) in her critique of the way 'resistance' has been used in feminist scholarship provides an example of how market forces are reconfiguring young Bedouin women's gender identities and relations as a way of understanding how power produces its own sites of resistance. She argues that young Bedouin women in their resistance of tradition are "unwittingly enmeshing themselves in an extraordinarily complex set of new power relations" by presenting a more sexualised

femininity to their husbands through the use of make-up and wearing of negligees (p.51). Abu-Lughod points out that older Bedouin women's norms of modesty and segregated lives gave them more independence in their separate sphere, more opportunities for mobility without being subject to suspicion, and were protected by their kinswomen from unfair treatment by men. In contrast younger women's consumer practices and hyper-femininity were subjecting them to greater objectification, more restrictions on mobility, and dependence on men.

In a similar vein, Caroline Osella (2012), shows how the consumer culture together with Islamic reformism has enmeshed South Indian Muslim women in an intricate set of new power structures through the production of "impeccably gendered heterosexual subjectivities" (p.241). She illustrates how young women's fantasies about glamour, romance, and sexual intimacy are enabled through the market and expressed through the wedding video. White (2013) points out that this display of women's sexuality and the public acknowledgment of sexual intimacy between couples may appear as an indication of liberation because it indicates a break from a past where women's sexuality was strictly controlled and sexualised presentations of the self were taboo (p.3). However, as Osella (2012) points out, the bride's highly sexualised appearance is acceptable only because it is meant for the husband. Women's sexuality continues to be controlled in the way she is expected to negotiate between morality and desire in her presentation of self: she must, on the one hand, look 'simple' and 'respectable' as a Muslim woman, and yet be desirable to her husband by looking beautiful and glamorous

The way in which women's agency in marriage is discussed in a milieu of increasing commodification, reinforces Abu-Lughod's (1990) thesis on modern techniques of power. In many parts of the world, the shift towards the ideal of companionate marriage has gone hand-in-hand with the emergence of lavish commercial weddings. Edwards (1989) and Kendall (1996), for example, commenting on modern weddings in Japan and South Korea respectively, illustrate how the commercial wedding ceremony reinforces ideas about romance and conjugality, and also gendered norms of beauty. Edwards (1989) characterises the wedding industry as 'clever' in adeptly exploiting the

various needs and desires of modern Japanese people. The commercial wedding enables families to display social status, and meets practical considerations like convenience, while also indulging young people's desires like stardom. The ingenuity of commercialism, Edward argues, is exemplified in the way the wedding industry has also introduced new rituals that epitomise both the modern values of romance, and traditional Japanese values like the ethic of dependence on kin and community, and respect for elders.

Indeed many have argued that capitalism in various parts of the world has reconfigured the marital relationship in such a ways that it has deepened unequal power relations between husbands and wives. Murray Li (1988), for example, shows how for urban Malay women living in Singapore, the household was no longer the collective agricultural enterprise it once was where complementarity was emphasised. She argues that in the context of wage labour where only the husband works, Malay women find various ways to "address the individualizing potential of the wage form and negotiate the meaning of goods and services exchanged within the domestic unit" in order to secure a sense of autonomy and security without reducing the conjugal relationship to a transactional one (p.682). The commodification of the family has also contributed to new gender stereotypes of men as breadwinners and women as housewives (Collier 1997; Kendall 1996; Murray Li 1988). Kendall (1996) notes, for example, how within the South Korean middle-class wives of corporate executives are expected to consume "both as a measure of their husband's success and as the means and evidence of their being 'beloved wives'" (p.116). Even in the context of women contributing to the household income through wage work, a woman's earning power has not fundamentally altered the hierarchical structure of relations between either parents and daughters (*cf.* Kendall 1996; Sharma 1986) or husbands and wives (*cf.*Gamburd 2000). In fact, both Kendall (1996) and Sharma (1986) argue that rather than wage work giving women more leverage in deciding who and when they would marry, the marriage timing of women was usually delayed as a consequence of her income being appropriated for household survival.

Capitalism and modern consumer cultures in reconfiguring social relations and customary practices are also transforming gender identities in the way men and women experience and present the 'self'. Rather than assuming the homogenising impact of a global culture, it is important to investigate how older cultural forms of personhood interact with the portrait of the modern individual self to produce different types of selves in various contexts.

4. Individual and Relational Selves – Understanding the Narrator

As I have established in the introduction to this chapter, choice and individual preference are central tropes in contemporary marriage narratives because they are fundamental values of the modern person. Rose (1996) reflects that "in our current confused ethical climate" the 'self' and its attendant terms—"autonomy, identity, individuality, liberty, choice, fulfilment" is perhaps the one value that "seems beyond reproach" (p.1). Speaking of the 'West' in general, he argues that "it is in terms of our autonomous selves that we understand our passions and desires, shape our lifestyles, choose our partners, marriage, even parenthood" (ibid). Yet, as I have shown, the South Asian literature illustrates that stories about choosing a marriage partner are narrated in a context where parents and kin continue to influence why, how, and to whom people get married. Contemporary marriage narratives, in fact, present a puzzle: within them both the 'individual' and the 'relational' self seem to be simultaneously and variously deployed. As I will show for Sri Lanka, the puzzle becomes more salient when marriages fail or when women are asked to explain their 'unmarried' status. In this section I will first examine some theories of personhood that present the 'Asian' person as a 'relational self' in explaining the central role family and kinship play in people's lives. I will then discuss how people, specifically women, act cannot be understood only by examining cultural concepts of personhood, but also by interrogating the institutional contexts in which the 'self' is deployed.

The Relational Self

Understanding notions of the 'self' and the 'person' has been a rich source of inquiry

within anthropology (*cf.* Daniel 1984; Carsten 2004b, c; Edwards 1989; Ewing 1991; Joseph 1999; McKim Marriott 1976; Parish 1994; Spiro 1993). McKim Marriot (1976) used the term 'dividual self' to describe the South Asian person characterised as having fluid permeable boundaries with other persons in contrast to the bounded indivisible person in Western social and psychological theory. Such a theory of personhood, argues Marriot, reflects "an elaborate transactional culture, characterized by explicit institutionalised concerns for givings and receivings of many kinds in kinship, work, and worship" (p.109). Edwards (1989) utilises Japanese concepts of personhood to explain why marriage is a cultural imperative and a moral responsibility in Japan. He arguesthat the moral universe of a Japanese person is driven by 'incompleteness' and it is only through marriage that a person can achieve wholeness. In her analysis of cultures of relatedness, Carsten (2004b, c) shows how the process of becoming a person amongst Malays is intrinsically linked to the bonds of relatedness they forge through the processes of living and eating together throughout a person's life. Parish (1994), in his study of moral consciousness among Newari people of Nepal, uses the term 'web of relatedness' to explain how Newars conceptualise their lives to be produced by, bounded to, and rooted in family (p.126). Parish posits that Newari people's sense of 'self' originates from within their family relationships. He argues that Newars "grow out of" and are bound to a world of kinship, "find value and meaning in family life," and are "defined by their commitments to family" (p.126). In short, family "provides the structure and unity of their lives" (ibid). According to Parish, because mutuality, reciprocity, and inter-dependency are central values in Nepal merging is not antithetical to identity because people locate the 'self' through relationships.

Joseph (1999a) refers to 'relationality' and 'patriarchal connectivity' to describe kinship relations in Arab families. Relationality, according to Joseph, describes "a process by which persons are socialised into social systems that value linkage, bonding, and sociability" (p.9). She defines connectivity as a psychodynamic process through which one person begins to see themselves as part of significant others and may

> read each other's minds, answer for each other, anticipate each other's needs, expect their needs to be anticipated by significant

> others, and often shape their likes and dislikes in accordance with the likes and dislikes of others (p.12).

Joseph argues that relational selfhood and connectivity are not inimical to agency because in such societies "maturity is signalled in part by the successful enactment of a myriad of connective relationships" (p.12).

The relational self is often contrasted with how the person is conceptualised in much of the philosophical and psychological literature in the West: as autonomous, bounded, and separate, where individual behaviour "is organized and made meaningful primarily by reference to one's own internal repertoire of thoughts, feelings, and action, rather than by reference to the thoughts, feelings, and actions of others" (Markus and Kitayama 1991, p.226). There has been a powerful critique from anthropologists and cross-cultural psychologists of such a dichotomising view who argue that the boundaries are blurred between an independent, enduring, and unique 'Western' individual, and the 'Eastern' interdependent, contingent, and embedded relational person (*cf.* Ewing 1991; Markus and Kitayama 1991, 2003; Spiro 1993). Others have critiqued the tendency to use the 'Western' model of the person as the hallmark of the mature self (Joseph 1999a), and also in conceptualising the healthy person "as one that can maintain its integrity across diverse social environments" (Markus and Kitayama 2003, p.604). Many have also argued that it is over-simplistic to imagine Western self conceptions as lacking elements of relationality (Spiro 1993). Drawing from a cross-cultural study of the United States and Japan, Markus and Kitayama (1991) argue that in reality "people everywhere are created by, constrained by, and responsive to their various interpersonal contexts" (pp. 227-228).

Multiple Selves, Multiple Contexts

Spencer (1997) asserts that anthropological studies about the concept of the person have called into question the "common-sense expectations about personhood" and shown that "the same people may hold different senses of personhood, sometimes perhaps stressing the person as the evanescent centre of a network of exchanges and relationships, at other times stressing a more familiar sense of the person as robustly

bounded individual" (p.694). He argues that in most cultural settings ideas about the person and how people act and present themselves are neither unitary nor stable, but are in fact context-driven. Therefore, according to Spencer, a more interesting and valuable discussion about personhood and agency arises from asking:

> in what contexts […]do 'individualistic' ideas of personhood predominate and in what contexts are they downplayed or denied? When is the self most easily viewed as stable and enduring, and when is it better understood as a temporary product of an idiosyncratic history? (p.694).

Spencer animates his questions by presenting a young woman's narrative about demonic possession. He relates how Fatima—a young Muslim woman living in rural Sri Lanka—is forced to "confront her own destiny as a young woman whose role it is to be married according to her family's wishes" when, after an encounter with a young man, Fatima experiences herself as "a subject of desire" (p.701). Fatima, however, cannot express her desires in her present context as an ordinary young woman under the protection of her family. Instead, she articulates them through the idiom of demonic possession whereby Fatima claims authority to enact her desires not by presenting her 'self' as the author, but by claiming its source as the demons. Spencer explains that in such situations "'ordinary', normally un-protean, people find their predicament can only be rendered intelligible if they abandon their own sense of the stability of their person" (p.697). He argues that in the context of distress and suffering not only Fatima, but also her family and the community find it "more intelligible […] to understand what is happening to her as the work of external agencies and the outcome of past events, rather than as an expression of an essential and unchanging inner person" (p.705). Spencer's story illustrates how an individual person can hold different senses of the self and how they are articulated depends on the institutional context people are placed. In addition, Spencer makes the point that it is by denying a unitary self through a narrative of possession that Fatima is able to move to a more central position within her family, and perhaps "carve out a bit more freedom for herself by moving from the confined world of Muslim womanhood" (p.705). Spencer suggests that "possession provides a possible source of authority which empowers people to restructure the unsatisfactory intersubjective world in which their symptoms

first became manifest" (p.706).

Maracek and Senadheera (2012) in their analysis of young women's narratives about attempted suicide or self-harm in Sri Lanka show how women use 'canonical narratives' in explaining their actions and intentions.[11] They observe that young girls who self-harm consistently disavow moral culpability by accounting for their actions as resulting from external circumstances: "angry or disappointed parents, painful public humiliations, parents', or elders' failure to fulfil obligations of care, and betrayals or blackmail by peers" (p.72). At the same time, by describing events as simply 'happening' to them and acting 'suddenly' without deliberation, Maracek and Senadheera argue that these young □□□ deflect any suspicion of being thought of as wilful agents. Once the motivation for self-harm has been assigned to the girls' external world, Maracek and Senadheera assert that the narratives ultimately serve the important function of 'identity repair'. Feelings of anger and the desire to hurt or shame a parent is

> morally and ethically dubious, especially for girls. [Therefore] by portraying themselves as not knowing their own thoughts, as unable to account for their actions, as not having the intention to hurt others, girls could re-position themselves as modest, docile, obedient daughters (p.74).

Narrative psychologist Jerome Bruner (1990) theorizes that people tell stories to make meaning "out of their encounters with the world" (p.2), and argues that people are especially prompted to resort to narratives when they "encounter an exception to the ordinary" (p.49).[12] Bruner explains that because people are products of history and culturally constituted, they depend on "shared meanings and shared concepts and […]

[11] Maracek and Senadheera (2012) prefer the term 'self-harm' to 'suicide' or 'suicide attempt' for two reasons. "First, terms like 'suicide attempt' presume that an act of self-harm was intended to cause death. This may or may not be the case; self-harm has many possible motives, even when death is the result. Second, the term 'suicide attempt' implies that those who survive an act of self-harm have 'failed, while those who die have 'succeeded'. This is an implication that we prefer to avoid" (p.55).

[12] Bruner (1990) posits that the narrative impulse derives from the tradition of story-telling, a narrative's "principal property is its inherent sequentiality" (p.45). Bruner defines a narrative as "composed of a unique sequence of events, mental states, happenings involving human beings as characters or actors" (p.43). Furthermore, "a narrative can be 'real' or 'imaginary' without loss of its power as a story […] It has a structure internal to its discourse. In other words, the sequence of its sentences, rather than the truth or falsity of any of those sentences, is what determines its overall configuration or plot" (p.44).

shared modes of discourse for negotiating differences in meaning and interpretation" (p.13). He argues that "public meanings are negotiated. And in this process, meanings are not to [people's] own advantage unless [they] can get them shared by others" (ibid). Hence, according to Bruner, "there are even standardised means for 'making excuses' for our exceptionality when the intended meanings of our acts become unclear […] thereby re-legitimising what we are up to" (ibid). Therefore, when things 'go wrong' that suggests an imbalance in the general order of things, or a 'dilemma' presents itself that has moral consequences, a narrative forges a link between "the exception and the ordinary" (Bruner 1990, p.47) by telling stories that relate to "what is morally valued [and] morally appropriate (ibid, p.50). Bruner argues that the "viability of a culture inheres in its capacity for resolving conflicts, for explicating differences, and renegotiating communal meanings" (p.47). The narrative, therefore, is a powerful apparatus "for rendering the exceptional and the unusual into comprehensible form" (ibid).

Discursive psychologists use the term 'interpretative repertoires' to refer to implicit understandings that members of a culture or social group use as conversational resources, and also in their own internal monologues (Edley 2001; Reynolds and Wetherell 2003; Wetherell and Potter 1988). Interpretative repertoires are "explanatory resources to which speakers have access to make interpretations" (Wetherell and Potter 1988, p.172). Interpretative repertoires are also variable and not always consistent (Edley 2001; Reynolds and Wetherell 2003). Some of the inconsistency comes from people navigating among competing discourses in order to come up with a plausible story and a positive self-presentation (ibid). Edley (2001) makes the point that the available options are not always equal; some constructions or formulations will be more 'available' than others and are easier to use. "This is because some ways of understanding the world can become culturally dominant or hegemonic" (Edley 2001, p.190). Reynolds and Wetherell (2003) argue that "different repertoires construct different versions and evaluations of participants and events according to the rhetorical demands of the immediate context" (p.496). Moreover, the variability of interpretative repertoires used "allows for ideological dilemmas to arise as people argue and puzzle over the competing threads and work the inconsistencies

between them" (Reynolds and Wetherell 2003, p.497). As I □ □□show through examples from Sri Lanka, narratives serve an important purpose in restoring equilibrium to the social order and for reinstating relationships in the family.

Gendered Narratives

Lamb (1997) points out that one of the main deficiencies in the South Asian literature on personhood, as well as elsewhere, is that "it has been largely degendered" (p.281). She argues that a seemingly gender-neutral discussion "gives the […] impression that person and self are ontologically prior to and separate from gender identity" (ibid). Drawing from her study of Bengali men women, she argues that women's personhood is unique and "conceptions of personhood cannot be understood in isolation from conceptions about gendered selves" (p.296). Feminist theorists in the West have pointed out that women experience the self more relationally than men (*cf.* Chodorow 1978; Gilligan 1982). Lamb, however, finds that both men and women in her study site "defined themselves strongly in terms of their relations with others […] there were significant differences in the ways women and men found themselves to be constituted via relational ties" (p.290).

Maracek and Senadheera (2012) draw attention to the gendered dimension of women's narratives when they argue that the kinds of narratives young women use not only enable them to restore their place within their families, but also help families overcome their shame and humiliation by explaining their daughters' behaviour through □ culturally coherent idiom. In this case narratives restore equilibrium by bolstering the structure and integrity of the family. In Mody's (2008) analysis of young couples in New Delhi who elope, women's narratives about kidnapping and abduction do not necessarily absolve them of culpability—after all they have left their natal home to get married without parental consent. But by drawing on cultural repertoires in explaining a daughter's sudden departure from home, young women's narratives collude with their family's attempts to save face and restore their status within the community.

As I will illustrate in chapter seven, the gendered dimension of narratives is central to understanding the stories women relate about marriage and the different selves they present through them. Moreover, by juxtaposing narratives about stable marriages with those of 'failed' ones and also of single womanhood, I will demonstrate how paying attention to the context in which these different selves emerge is also vital in delineating how and why different selves can coexist.

5. Conclusion

The impact of social transformation on marriage, family, and kinship in various parts of the world cannot simply be read through the teleological script of 'modernity'. Ethnographic accounts about marriage from South Asia and elsewhere highlight how local configurations of 'modernity' are a result of a confluence of complex structures and processes like nationalism, caste, class, and religious reform. At the same time changing marriage practices everywhere is part of a broader process of social transformation. The challenge is to delineate what is similar and what is different without reducing the analysis to a comparison between 'tradition' and 'modernity'. In fact, by taking into account historical processes the oppositional boundary between 'tradition' and 'modernity' are blurred and calls into question normative understandings of 'tradition' as restrictive and 'modernity' as denoting greater freedom for people.

As I have reiterated throughout this chapter, the shift to a companionate marriage ideal is attendant to the 'development of the modern individual self—a person who chooses when, how, and to whom he/she will get married. Here too ethnographic accounts question the assumption that 'modernity' is producing similar types of persons in various parts of the world. Even though 'choice' and 'agency' are the overarching themes of contemporary marriage narratives, a closer analysis reveal that these concepts do not have universal meanings, but are context specific. Furthermore, the evidence also points to how decisions regarding marriage continue to be structured by social norms, especially expectations of family and kin. The

anthropological literature on 'self' and 'personhood', I showed, provide critical analytical frameworks through which to resolve the puzzle about how both the 'individual' and 'relational' self is simultaneously and variously deployed by women in their narration of marriage. The literature on personhood shows that not only a cultural understanding but a gendered analysis of narratives of the self can provide valuable insights into how and why women produce different narratives about the 'self' in various contexts.

While changing marriage practices have been extensively researched in the Indian sub-continent, this is not the case for Sri Lanka. Hence this thesis at one level attempts to fill this gap by providing an ethnographic account of marriage amongst the Sinhala middle-class in Sri Lanka. The evidence from South Asia reveals that while marriage and kinship are going through significant transformations, they are not easily explained through existing explanatory frameworks about the impact of 'modernity'. Hence, at another level, this thesis attempts to a more nuanced understanding of how women respond and grapple with social change in the domain of marriage. In a context where there is limited academic research on the nexus between the conception of modern individuals and women's narratives, this thesis ultimately attempts to problematize contemporary narratives about choice to interrogate more thoroughly whether an 'agentic self' accompanies 'modernity.'

2 – When the 'Field' is One's 'Home'

Privileges, Limitations, and Ethics of being an 'Indigenous' Anthropologist

1 Introduction – Going Home to the Field

When I left England and returned home to Sri Lanka to commence my fieldwork, I soon realised a fine balance had to be achieved between being a researcher and being everything else I was at home. My social roles as wife, mother, daughter, friend, and colleague soon invaded what I had imagined to be the pristine life of a PhD student immersed in her fieldwork. This negotiation between multiple roles was not particular to my personal life, but one I had to navigate carefully during my fieldwork. I had planned to conduct 'life-history' interviews with the aim of collecting a set of family histories on marriage. Middle-class neighbourhoods in Colombo rarely had community-based organisations through which I could have gained access to its membership through either volunteering or participation. The local Buddhist temple was often the only institution that drew in volunteers from the community for its programmes. As I identified myself as a 'Christian', it was not possible for me to gain access to these groups.[13] Regardless of this limitation, I had rather naïvely thought that, once I had established contact through a sponsor, I could somehow carry-on from there. Very early on into my work, however, I found that as a researcher attempting to study a social group that I belonged to and a social world that I had inhabited all my life, I could not ignore the norms that informed the way social relations are conducted in Sri Lanka. It was not possible to enter a middle-class home as a stranger with the hope of establishing the kind of rapport that was needed to ask questions of a 'personal' nature. I had to be already known. Very soon I found out what 'being known' really meant.

[13] Anti-Christian sentiment among Buddhist clergy is rife in Sri Lanka, and is partly a reaction to Christian evangelism. Buddhist monks often warn people, through public sermons and media broadcasts, about the 'ulterior' motives of evangelism, which is the destruction of Sinhala-Buddhist culture. Although I doubt I would have faced any personal risk, I was concerned that the motives of my research would be suspect thereby compromising the quality of relationships I needed to establish.

I had approached two former colleagues of mine who came from the type of middle-class families I wanted to study hoping that someone from their extended families who was a well-respected member of their community would introduce me to their neighbours. They readily agreed to help me and, after an initial visit during which I explained my research, so did the aunts of my colleagues. However, even when I was introduced by them as 'a friend of the family' to their neighbours, I realised that my presence placed enormous pressure on my gatekeepers. Because I was a stranger to these people—someone they had never met or had any connection to—the burden of accountability was on my sponsors. This meant that even before I could physically enter someone's home, (aunty) Mallika, for example, had to first spend some time explaining my project and my role as a researcher to them. She then had to accompany me to her neighbours' homes and remain there as I introduced myself and my research, and ascertained their willingness to talk to me before I scheduled an interview. Several women even requested Mallika to stay on when I eventually came back for the formal interview. Without her, regardless of my 'researcher' status, I was still a stranger to them. As a middle-class Sri Lankan I understood that inviting an outsider to one's home and having a conversation about personal matters was an anomalous situation. Even though the pursuit of education is highly respected and people go out of their way to help students, I had to discard the notion that my role as an indigenous researcher and my status as a scholar would help me circumvent established norms of conducting relationships. This also meant that for various social and ethical reasons, which I will discuss in detail in this chapter, I could not expect someone to act as a guarantor for me, especially since such a role had the potential of complicating their own social relations.

Within a few weeks I found myself having to re-think the trajectory of my field work. I had not envisaged that my research would lead me to study the extended families of people I already knew, but it was possibly the only way forward. I had to already be known to someone my respondents trusted if they were to trust me. I would like to think that it was a case of serendipity that my research ended up being closer to home than I had first imagined. On several occasions what had started off as casual conversations about my research with friends and colleagues, ended with them

volunteering their families as ‘interesting’ case studies. Even when I was still pursuing my neighbourhood-based fieldwork plan, I had several people already volunteering to talk to me in case I needed informants. Part of the reason, I believe, is that most people, especially women, were already interested in their families’ marriage histories, and ‘how did you get married?’ was a question they often asked their parents and grandparents as a way of making sense of their own lives—a point I will discuss in more detail in chapter five. Another way of describing my field work is to state that for social and ethical reasons, and for the sake of authenticity, I had to privilege my ‘social’ identity over my ‘professional’ one. In fact, my ‘professional’ identity, if it existed at all, was only a very small part of who I was to the people I interacted with. That I was doing a PhD mattered only because people already knew me. And it was because they knew me that they wanted to help me. Choosing to act from within an established set of social relations helped me gain access and establish trust. I believe this resulted in more honest and open dialogue with the people whose lives I present in my work. Whether my position as an ‘insider’ ultimately gave me epistemological privilege is, ultimately, a moot point. What is clearer is how my position as researcher studying her own community shaped my research methodology and determined the kind of information I was able to gather. More crucially, being an indigenous anthropologist raises a set of ethical questions; dilemmas and challenges, I believe, that have not been adequately resolved by researchers who found themselves by choice or chance in the same position I did.

In this chapter I first provide an overview of my field work, which I conducted over a period of eighteen months between June 2009 and December 2010. I then review the literature on insider/outsider positionality as it applies to my own position as an indigenous researcher to highlight that the relationships between the researcher and her ‘subjects’ are rarely dichotomous, but fluid and multi-dimensional. I examine how my own subject positions placed me sometimes in a privileged position and at other times imposed limitations and challenges. I suggest that it is these differences that make researchers more sensitive to the way they conduct research. I then take up the ethical questions related to being an indigenous researcher.

2 Ethnographic Research– an Overview of my Fieldwork

"Ethnography," states Madden (2010) "is a way of writing about people, a way of being with people, and in combination, a way of theorizing about people" (p.7). While ethnography can have many meanings (Caplan 1988), 'doing' ethnography entails a commitment to studying the social relations and cultural particulars of everyday human life by observing, participating, and by being in the same social space and cultural setting as the subjects of one's research (Atkinson et al 2001; Madden 2010). Ethnography as a methodology recognizes the central role of the researcher and acknowledges the multiple subject positions he/she occupies while engaged in both 'doing' and writing ethnography (Caplan 1988). Contemporary ethnography is characterised as multi-method and includes observation, participation, interviewing and archival analysis (Reinharz 1992), and draws on various techniques including the analysis of spoken narratives, the interpretation of visual materials, and the collection of archival material (Atkinson et al 2001). Although the 'indigenous anthropologist' is now an accepted role in the academy, I often felt hesitant about classifying my work as ethnographic because I was living at home and 'field work' did not necessitate a significant change to the rhythms and routines of my daily life. I draw on Madden's (2010) definition of doing ethnography as being essentially about actively and mindfully being with people that results in a systematic examination of social relations "that bound or characterise a particular time and space" (p.8), to claim that, even though I conducted my field work at home, I was continuously engaged in speaking to, spending time with, and observing people—sometimes with the deliberate intent of 'doing' research, and at other times not. Regardless of whether at that time I was consciously or unconsciously observing the world I lived in, I draw on both these kinds of experiences to produce, I hope, a rich account of people's lives.

The Respondents

My study focused on the Sinhala-Buddhist, middle-class community living in the capital city Colombo. The specific categorisation was made mainly because I believe that marriage and kinship do not have identical meanings for all social groups. Cultural practices and its meanings differ significantly across the different ethnic and religious

groups in Sri Lanka. The intersections of these identities with class and place of residence, I believe, also create sub-groups whose experiences cannot be easily generalized to represent the 'average Sri Lankan'. Colombo's middle-class groups are characterised by their heterogeneity. Subtle, yet tacitly acknowledged demarcations are used to differentiate between groups as I discuss in detail in chapter six. I used three of these in selecting my respondents. Firstly, I chose families for whom migration to Colombo was a living memory. In the context of the youngest generation I interviewed—mid-20s to late 30s, this meant that migration had taken place within the lifetime of their parents or grandparents. As I will explain later, the middle-class differentiates between older, more established Colombo-based families from newer migrants. In addition, I was keen to speak to families who had close links to their village in order to get a more in-depth idea about changing marriage practices. Secondly, I selected families for whom Sinhala was the primary language spoken at home. A critical distinction is drawn in Sri Lanka between those who speak English and those who do not where 'English speaking' is a marker of privilege. To speak it fluently was an indication of even greater privilege. Even as I articulated this demarcation, I was already aware that people who speak English with considerable ease may not necessarily come from families who speak English fluently; or it could be that although they spoke English in the public domain with friends and colleagues, Sinhala was the language spoken at home. There were also families that spoke English and Sinhala interchangeably—English with siblings and Sinhala with parents. Despite these subtle differences that made it seem impossible to differentiate between the various sub-groups, I chose to use 'Sinhala-speaking' as a main marker of difference. English-speaking families living in Colombo are usually thought of as the 'upper' middle-class: the older and younger generations speak fluent English; □□□□ are usually professionals or elite business people; have attended elite Colombo schools; and have values, tastes and preferences that are seen as more 'Western' than 'traditional'. In contrast, in the 'middle' middle-class, Sinhala was the primary language spoken at least by the older generations. This was partly because migration from the village to the city had occurred within their lifetime, and, therefore, they did not have the same privileged background as those in the upper-middle-class group. This did not necessarily mean ignorance of the English language or the inability to speak it, but the level of comfort

people felt in speaking English. It did not also mean that the younger generation did not converse in English—many of them did so with ease. Thirdly, because wealth played an important role in the choice of lifestyle and in facilitating social mobility, I differentiated between lower-income and average- income families. Rather than income or wealth figures, I based my judgement of this on the kind of neighbourhood people lived in, the size and type of their house, and whether people owned a vehicle—all of which contribute to how the middle-class categorises people.

Data

The core of my study consists of fifty-one life-history interviews conducted primarily with nine families and several others living in various suburbs of Colombo. Here, 'family' means the extended family spanning two, sometimes three generations. I usually spoke with a female member of the younger generation first, their mothers thereafter, then to as many cousins and aunts as possible, and finally to husbands and brothers of the younger generation. The number of interviews I was able to conduct within one family depended on people's availability (some had migrated), and their willingness to talk to me. Nine was the most number of interviews I was able to do from within one family with three others being limited to only two people. With the exception of one family, I was able to speak with only two generations as the oldest generation had passed away or the youngest generation was too young to be interviewed. The ages of the older generation ranged from mid-50s to early 70s with the oldest generation being in their 80s. The younger generation were people in their mid-20s to late 30s. Since none of them had children above the age of fourteen, I did not interview the youngest generation. For the purpose of understanding what it meant to be single or divorced, I spoke with several others from the younger and middle generations. Many of the interviews with women lasted about 1.5-2 hours while some went on for much longer.

Because people I interviewed talked about the importance of horoscopes and the *pōruva* ceremony, I conducted semi-structured interviews with several astrologers and *aṣṭaka* people—officiators of the Sinhala-Buddhist wedding ceremony. My exploration

of the wedding industry was done with the objective of understanding how the various actors came together to produce the elaborate commercial wedding. It was through the *aṣṭaka* people that I obtained permission to observe weddings. Because many of the weddings I observed were held in the morning, this meant being at the place as early as 5 am in order to observe the preparations. I would usually sit beside the *pōruva* and chat to the officiator about his role while noting down his views on contemporary weddings often prompted by the appearance of various other service providers— the hotel staff setting-up a champagne fountain, the entrance of the band or DJ. I would then walk to the garden and observe the photo shoot that usually took place before the wedding. I also conducted semi-structured interviews with beauticians/hairdressers, a dress designer, and a wedding planner about commercial weddings and their role within it.

The life-history interviews also led me to examine marriage classifieds in the local newspapers as some of the families had used them to find partners. I analysed a sample of popular Sinhala newspapers from the 1940s to the present to get an overview of how the criteria for a 'good' match had changed over the years. I was also interested in finding out more about the Sinhala media when I began to realise the influence magazines and TV programmes had in shaping young people's ideas and expectations about glamorous weddings and modern lifestyles. For this purpose, I did a survey of the TV programmes that were currently being aired on the local television networks and a content analysis of six Sinhala tabloids published between 2009 and 2010.

To say that my research was limited to the interviews I conducted during my fieldwork would be to discount the numerous informal conversations I had with both my 'formal' informants and with various friends, colleagues, acquaintances on the subject of marriage. During the course of a conversation people spontaneously shared information about their families providing anecdotes in relation to the emerging themes I was discovering during my research. These conversations ranged from short chats to long debates. When the issue of class difference and class assertion began to emerge as a dominant theme, I began to pay close attention to how issues of class are

expressed in the everyday conversations of middle-class people. Many of the initial questions I had began to develop as key themes emerged in course of my fieldwork.

3 On being an "Indigenous Feminist Anthropologist"

The complex, dynamic, and seemingly contradictory positionality of the anthropologist as both a 'subjective insider' and an 'objective outsider' has been the subject of an on-going debate within the discipline (Caplan 1988, Madden 2010; Sluka and Robben 2007). In this section I summarise the historical context of these debates before moving onto considering how it applies to my own work. From its early years, anthropology differentiated itself from the rest of the social sciences by claiming that it studied societies and communities as a whole (Asad 1973), which required the anthropologist to live within the societies they studied in order to understand the lives of people from the 'inside' even as he/she stepped 'outside' to engage in interpretation and comparison (Sluka and Robben 2007). Starting from the 1960s there was both a theoretical criticism of the social sciences' claim to objectivity and neutrality, and a political critique of anthropology's historical relationship with Western imperialism and colonization (Asad 1973; Said 1978/2003).[14] Influenced by Foucault's writings, the post-modern movement of the 1970s and 1980s drew attention to the relationship between power and the construction of knowledge which resulted in the 'reflexive turn' in anthropology (Sluka and Robben 2007). Anthropologists began paying close attention to the power dynamics involved in fieldwork, the style of ethnographic writing, and issues of representation (Robben 2007; Spencer 2001). Critical anthropologists questioned the discipline's rhetorical authority by pointing out that knowledge about culture was produced through a dialogic relationship which involved a continuous negotiation between the anthropologist and his/her informants, and this multiplicity of voices was often hidden and unacknowledged (Clifford 1983). One result of these debates was the 'literary

[14] Proponents of critical ethnography challenged traditional anthropology's claims of objectivity and ethical neutrality (Foley 2002; Morsy 1988). Third world critiques from within the nationalist movements in Asia and Africa challenged anthropologists to take account of how their representations of the 'other' were influenced by the political-economic system in which they worked (Abu-Lughod 1991; Asad 1973; Caplan 1988; Morsy 1988; Said 1978/2003).

turn'. The 'subjective' and 'inter-subjective' production of the ethnographic text through translation and interpretation was highlighted and compared to fiction because it was similar in form, style, and narrative structure (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Bell 1993; Sluka and Robben 2007; Stacey 1991). It must be noted here that the post-modernists' attention to the representation of the 'other' and the importance of reflexivity in writing about 'others' had already been raised within feminist scholarship and had many points of convergence, but was largely ignored by male scholars (Bell 1993; Caplan 1988; Spencer 2001).[15]

Abu-Lughod (1993/2008) argues that the mainstream debates about positionality also failed to consider two critical groups that unsettle the boundaries between the 'self' and 'other'—feminists and indigenous anthropologists, whose anthropological practice inherently calls into question the political implications of the self/other distinction. Post-modernism was also critiqued by feminists for paying more attention to the 'politics of representation'—the way texts are interpreted and how meanings are constructed, without a corresponding discussion on the politics of ethnography—how anthropological discourse are implicated in the wider systems of power (Abu Lughod 1993/2008; Caplan 1988a). Spencer (2001), in his assessment of these developments, argues that while many versions of 'reality' exist, including the anthropologists' own, "a good anthropologist will […] allow his or her readers to assess the differences between [them]" (p.445) by □r□□□□□□□ the "raw material" and laying bare to his/her readers the "conditions of [ethnographic] production" (p.447). This is the principal aim of this chapter: to acknowledge the influence my own subject positions have had in shaping *'the story'* I relate, so that when I present the various *stories* in the following chapters, the reader is able to discern the composite nature of this work.

Although I did not intend my study of marriage in Sri Lanka to focus exclusively on women, a majority of my respondents were women. This was mainly due to my own identity: as an 'insider,' that is a Sinhalese woman, acting from within the conventional norms of Sri Lankan society, men were often inaccessible to me, for reasons I discuss

[15] See Bell (1993a) and Visweswaran (1994) who trace the genealogy of the 'reflexive turn' to the early works of women anthropologists.

later on in this section. Hence, for this and other reasons—some of which I have already indicated in section one, the stories I present can only be a few of many other narratives. The feminist critique of the social sciences that had started in the 1960s had pointed out the "partial" and "distorted" representation of women within the social sciences (Harding 1987, p.1). In order to correct this bias, feminist scholars advocated research on, by, and for women which was simultaneously accompanied by a discussion about methods, methodology, and epistemology.[16] Feminist standpoint theorists argued that women, because of their subordinate position in society, were more attentive to the perspectives of the dominant groups while being sensitive to their own position within social structures (Nielsen 1990; Roberts 1981; Stacey 1991). Hartsock (1987) suggested that because women's position in society differed structurally from that of men and their realities were profoundly different from those of men "women's lives make available a particular and privileged vantage point" that would help expose the patriarchal ideologies and institutions (p.159).[17] Hartsock and others were critiqued by post-structural feminists who pointed out that standpoint theory disregards how the historical context and social position of women shape women's narratives embedding them within conventional power relations (McCann and Kim 2003). Standpoint theorists then critiqued post-structural feminists for presenting subjectivity and identity as constituted purely in and through language and discourse, and argued that such a perspective did not allow for human agency and effective political struggle (ibid). Haraway (1988) bridges this gap by arguing that while there can be no such thing as a superior feminist vantage point, 'partial perspectives', 'embodied objectivity', and 'situated knowledge' can still constitute a vision that is still critical because it does not draw from a single fixed position but from within a web of different subject positions that is not a sweeping view from above but multiple views from within.

[16] *Cf.* Harding (1987); Neilsen (1990); Stacey (1991)

[17] Feminism came under criticism by both Black and Third-world feminists for emphasizing 'sameness' based on women's shared experiences of oppression while ignoring the differences between women and the multiple dimensions of identity (Narayan 1993). Feminist anthropology was criticized by Third World feminists for objectifying women and for its own complicity in neo-colonialism (Abu Lughod 1993/2008; Lazreg 1986; Mohanty 1988).

The debate about insider/outsider positionality and the politics of representation was also taken up by Black and 'native' scholars studying their own communities. They drew on standpoint theory to claim epistemological privilege based on their life experiences and argued that their 'insider' position gave them deeper insights and this intimate and often tacit knowledge resulted in more authentic and trustworthy accounts of the field (Chavez 2008; Griffith 1998). It was soon pointed out, however, that the insider/outsider distinction was a false dichotomy because neither 'cultures' nor 'societies' are homogenous; therefore differences between 'insiders' and 'outsiders' and 'natives' and 'foreigners' may at various times be outweighed by other differences such as class, education, gender, and religion (Chavez 2008; Narayan 1993). Parameswaran (2001) argues that all knowledge production is shaped by the politics of location and, therefore, all ethnographic representations are "partial, constructed, and situated" (p.69). What these debates achieved is to establish that all knowledge is situated within a social and historical context and that positionality is not a handicap (Abu Lughod 1993/2008). Moreover, both 'outsiders' and 'insiders' have to contend with methodological and ethical issues arising from their particular position (Chavez 2008)—a discussion I take up in section four of this chapter.

Feminist scholars also challenged conventional research methodology for being hierarchical and exploitative (Oakley 1981; Stacey 1991). While feminists employed the same methods as mainstream researchers, it was *how* they practised them that made the feminist researcher different. Harding (1987) points out that by listening attentively and critically analysing how men's and women's lives are conceptualized in a particular setting, feminist researchers can uncover behaviours that were not thought to be significant before. Feminist research methodology is characterised by the involvement of the researcher as a 'person' (Reinharz 1992) and calls into question the role of the researcher "as an objective instrument of data collection" (El-Solh 1988, p.91) and for treating informants as objects and sources of data (Oakley 1981). During my fieldwork I found myself in a similar position as that of Oakley who found that the interview could be exploitative if the researcher maintains a degree of detachment for the purpose of objectivity, and extracts information without yielding any of her own. Like Oakley, I found that forming more equal and open relationships to be more

ethical. Harding (1987) argues that the best feminist research is when the researcher locates herself "in the same critical plane as the overt subject matter," and makes explicit the way in which the researcher's social identity and historical position, and also her "assumptions, beliefs and behaviours" is implicated in the way knowledge gets produced (p.9).

In the following sub-sections I discuss how these debates resonate with the challenges I faced during my fieldwork and frame the epistemological position of my work.

3.1 Presenting the 'Self'

Having grown up within the middle-class in Sri Lanka I was aware that people usually made astute observations about people's identities by taking note of a whole complex of factors. During an initial social encounter people would want to know my parents' names, my father's occupation, where his family originated from, where I went to school, and, who my husband is, his occupation, his father's occupation, and place of origin. At the same time, they would provide their own answers, even if I had not asked the questions of them. Through this initial set of disclosures there are, I believe, parallel evaluations taking place. Firstly, people are *placing* you in the social order while simultaneously asserting their own position. The questions allow someone to ascertain your place in the middle-class as they reveal vital information about caste and class.[18] People's social connections also play a crucial role in asserting identity while laying the foundation for building trust. By mentioning illustrious kin or friends, people usually want you to know who they are in the social order. The questions are also asked with the hope of transforming the stranger to a known entity by locating them within a common social network, which is important if a relationship is to move forward. This can sometimes mean a relentless barrage of questions about people you may be related to or are acquainted with through your various social networks.

I had little room for manoeuvre because there was an already established procedure through which people's identities were 'read' by the middle-class. In some ways, this

[18] How caste and class are evaluated will be discussed in chapter six.

did not matter very much. With friends and colleagues identities had already been established through years of association. This did not necessarily mean that their extended families had the same knowledge. Commenting on his experience of working in "different arenas" in Sri Lanka, Galappatti (2004) observes that "successful social actors in Sri Lanka often employed strategies for 'deferring' the process of being objectified—selectively deploying information and narratives about themselves to evade being assigned unfavourable social identities" (p.12). He says he found himself "instinctively employing the same methods." 'Deferring' refers to a form of representation that is "deliberated"—withholding information about the self, and also "actively displaying or communicating other aspects of identity that positioned [him] in ways that were less problematic or perhaps more easy to relate to" (Personal communication 06 July 2011). Galappatti (2004) emphasizes that while he never said anything that was untrue, he fore-grounded only those aspects he wished to while withholding other more problematic ones (ibid). Given that my research involved talking to people about their personal lives, I found it difficult to withhold or defer information when details about my life were sought. My family name and my father's village would have indicated to the older- generation that I did not come from a high-caste family. My father's occupation and the elite Christian girls' school I attended would have indicated that my family had risen up the ranks. The fact that I spoke Sinhala interspersed with English indicated that I came from an English-speaking background. My husband's name revealed he was a 'Burgher'—a minority 'ethnic' group of Dutch or Portuguese origin, which was immediately followed by a question about religion and I would have to disclose that I identified as a Christian. Any one of these aspects of my identity could have created social distance if I chose to privilege my professional identity.

However, social norms required me to treat the older generation with respect and play the part of a younger person who had come to learn from them. With my own generation I had to immediately convey that I treated them as an equal. Any indication that I was somehow superior to them by virtue of my education would have made them reluctant to open up to me. I downplayed the high status a PhD qualification has in Sri Lanka and acted as I would have had I met them as a close

acquaintance. I established common ground by talking about shared acquaintances and interests and asking about their work. I believe I gained respect by playing my social role rather than inventing one of a researcher. I also knew that I had to be conscious about how I was perceived from the way I spoke and how I dressed, and also from how I displayed my economic status. As much as I wanted to be as honest as possible, I did not want to create social distance by appearing to be very different. My uniform of long *kurta* tops and pants was a familiar dress code usually associated with university students. Although I interspersed my Sinhala with English phrases, I worked hard at minimising their frequency, especially with the older generation. The conversation flowed smoothly enough to indicate to me that my efforts had paid off.

While dress and speech mattered, what mattered more was how I chose to perform my identity in relating to people. It was with the women in Athurugiriya who came from a lower-income group that I faced difficulties in revealing my economic background. Athurugiriya was on the outskirts of Colombo and the people I visited lived away from the town centre. By car it took me forty-five minutes; travelling by bus would have taken me at least double that time. Owning one's own house and car were markers of economic success and was one of the dividing lines between the lower-middle classes and middle and upper groups. My travelling by car would not have caused too much distance because, although these families themselves did not own cars, many of their working children did. It was the type of car that caused the difficulty. We owned an SUV--considered a luxury vehicle. One of the first questions Mallika—my guarantor—asked me was *"is this your vehicle or the bank's?"*—meaning, was it my husband's official vehicle. I could not bring myself to say it belonged to us. I justified my half-truth by telling myself that the vehicle theoretically belonged to the bank as it was purchased using the subsidised car loan my husband had access to as a staff member. I was being dishonest, however, when I said that the car and the driver were provided by the bank and I was using it because I was pregnant and I found travelling by public transport tiring. It was with Mallika that I faced the most difficulty because I knew that she was struggling economically and was trying hard to hold things together until her sons completed their education and eased the financial burden. Subsequently when she called to say she would like to visit the baby, I was

really concerned that the size of my house would create social distance between us undermining the close bond we had formed. Although she never came because of a family illness, I know now that I need not have worried. Reflecting on the few times she asked for my assistance—helping her eldest son with job applications and seeking advice on getting the best possible medical attention for her youngest son's mental illness—I realise that she was quite aware of my social status. The fact that she chose to keep in touch with me long after I completed my interviews meant that we had somehow managed establish a bond by accommodating the many differences between us.

A policy of honesty, however, did not mean revealing unwanted or uncomfortable information. It was during the first few weeks of fieldwork that I began to understand the role of caste in marriage. I had been unaware of this because my parents had deliberately avoided the subject of caste precisely because they wanted to downplay that aspect of their identity. As I will explain in detail in chapter six, caste was 'hidden' and people often claimed it did not matter except in marriage. The mistake I made in one of the interviews was to respond to such a claim by revealing my own caste-status in an amused tone of voice. It was meant to indicate that caste did not matter to me either. To baldly say, however—*"my family is low-caste"* was to transgress a taboo. I was immediately admonished by an older woman —"*don't talk like that duva. I am sure you've got it wrong"* and I learnt not to share that part of my family background again. Even when I happened to mention it to a friend in my own generation, the knitting of eyebrows followed by an awkward silence meant that such honesty was unwelcome. Most people had grown up with caste hierarchy imbibed in them, and to openly acknowledge that I was from a lower caste made social interaction rather awkward.

These incidents made me question my status as an 'insider'. Because I was of a similar background to the people I was interviewing, there was an expectation that I should already 'know' things and people assumed that I would understand the references they were making to horoscopes, Sinhala-Buddhist rituals and customs, tensions with in-laws etc. For the most part I did. I had unfortunately not grasped the issue of caste

considerations in marriage. Although I was sensitive to the role 'class' played in how people judged each other, I had obviously failed to pick up the nuances of caste-class dynamics because caste was a forbidden subject in my family. I was worried that people would perceive me as completely 'other' because of this handicap. In order not to appear ignorant again I took a trip to my father's village with the intention of chatting to my father's oldest cousin. By asking him to recount the history of marriage in my family, I compelled him to talk about caste. His narrative gave me insight into why some marriages were considered 'good' and certain others were still talked about with a sense of shame. The hesitancy with which he spoke at first made it clear that even within the family 'caste' was a taboo subject. The conversation ultimately lasted the entire morning and later it was often alluded to by my older cousins at family gatherings as the time when *"nangi (younger sister) unlocked the family secrets."*

3.2 Scoping the Field - Setbacks and Limitations

My previous experience of research had been within the development sector with members of low-income groups living mostly in rural areas. My interviews with people from the middle and upper classes had been limited to policy issues, never about personal matters. As soon as I returned to Sri Lanka I thought it best to seek advice from more experienced researchers about interviewing the middle-class in Colombo. A professor recounted the challenges of conducting research about household decision-making within the middle-class in Colombo. "They wouldn't even come to the door" she told me. Her experiences underscored what I had suspected—that the Colombo middle-class was neither familiar nor comfortable with the idea of being researched, especially on such a personal subject as marriage. She advised me to try a neighbourhood in the outer suburbs of Colombo where I could perhaps gain access through a community organization. I decided to approach two of my colleagues from a former workplace for several reasons. Firstly, because they worked within a research environment, they would understand the nature of my work and explain it to whomever they would introduce me to. Secondly, as mentioned at the outset, because their family backgrounds fitted the sub-group I was hoping to focus on, I assumed that they could find contacts from within their social networks. Thirdly, they

knew me well enough to trust that I would not deliberately harm or exploit anyone they introduced me to. The most important thing, I would realise later, is that we shared a friendship and, hence, they *wanted* to help me, and, by extension, so did their families.

But before I understood the role prior relationships would play in determining my research, I was still intent on finding two neighbourhoods that I was broadly classifying as 'lower-income middle-class' and 'middle-income middle-class'. After I explained my research to my long-time colleagues—Ramani and Subhashini, they immediately called their aunts who they thought could help me because they were quite actively involved in their community. When I went to meet them the two neighbourhoods they lived in seemed 'ideal'. The community in Athurugiriya was on the outskirts of the Greater Colombo municipal area and fitted the profile of a mostly lower-income newly urbanized group, whereas the neighbourhood in Dehiwela just outside the City of Colombo was an established middle-class neighbourhood comprising mostly 'middle' middle-class families. Within a month, however, I realised that this approach would not work. Firstly, at the time of my research there were no active community-based organizations in either community except in the Buddhist temple where women gathered to teach at the *Daham Pāsala* (Sunday school), attend *Bana* programmes (sermons on Lord Buddha's teachings) and engage in the occasional community service projects. In Athurugiriya Mallika was the leader of a group of women who attended the weekly *Bana* programme conducted by a renowned Buddhist monk. In Dehiwela, Gunawathie was actively involved in running the *Daham Pāsala*. As mentioned before, as a Christian it was not possible for me to gain access to these groups. Despite this setback, the two of them were willing to help me. They promised to talk to the neighbours they 'knew very well' and let me know. After a few days Gunawathie reluctantly told me that although her young neighbour had agreed to talk to me, her husband had been unhappy about her talking to a stranger in his absence. From her tone of voice and the explanation she gave me I realised that I had caused her discomfort. Her neighbour was obligated to help her, but by asking for something she could not give it had created an awkward social situation. Mallika, a more dynamic character and, as I later found out, an unofficial counsellor in her neighbourhood, had

approached her immediate circle of close friends. During the interviews I found out why they had consented. They had all agreed simply because they could not refuse their friend. That I was Ramani's friend played a small part in their willingness to talk to me. Ramani was known to them as a niece Mallika cared about deeply and was seen as someone who fulfilled her familial duties by visiting her aunt regularly even though she lived quite a distance away. As a friend of Ramani's I was not a complete stranger. It was a tenuous connection, however, and I could not continue further without causing difficulties for Mallika and her neighbours. For example, Anoma could only talk to me on a day that her daughters had gone out. She told me that they had warned her about revealing *"too much"* because they *"did not want to feel ashamed of their family."* Her husband had found out that I was coming and decided to make a surprise visit from his workplace. He hung around for almost 45 minutes into the interview because, she told me later, he was also afraid of what she would tell me. Geetha and her husband came to Mallika's house because she felt more comfortable talking to me there. This forced Mallika to host them to tea and then manoeuvre the men to sit outside on the porch while I conducted the interview inside. Mallika then had to restrict herself to the kitchen for more than an hour. In both these instances, the fact that I was someone 'unknown' created discomfort, and even suspicion.

In Dehiwela, my research took a different turn. When I had first spoken to Subhashini about finding me a contact, I had discussed my research in detail with her. As a friend and colleague, I was interested in her opinion. She was quite excited about my topic. She talked a about her mother's family and how unusual she thought their history was. During this conversation she suddenly suggested making her family one of my case studies. She was genuinely keen that I speak to her family because she felt that I would "learn a lot" from studying their lives. At first I was not too keen on taking up the offer as I felt I was exploiting our friendship. During a subsequent conversation, however, she encouraged me to talk to her family insisting that their history was interesting and worth recording. Subhashini's aunt--Gunawathie, who had already welcomed me warmly to her home, was more than willing to accommodate my interviewing her mother and sisters who did not live in Colombo in her home. Their willingness to talk to me was due to my friendship with Subhashini. They had met me

at her wedding and subsequently Subhashini had spoken to them about how I had helped her with an academic assignment. These were the first references every one of them made when I contacted them to schedule an interview: *"I remember you at the wedding";* and *"Subhashini has told us about how you've encouraged her with her studies."* Within a few weeks I had spoken to all the female members of Subhashini's family, including her aunt who was visiting from Germany who went out of her way to find time to talk to me.

Understanding that as a Sri Lankan, regardless of my position as a researcher, I could not enter a middle-class home without an already established connection marked a turning point in my research. I decided to use my social networks to gain access to various kinds of middle-class families. Once I was within my own network, the high regard Sri Lankan people have for education and their willingness to help students achieve their academic goals played a significant role in helping me find individuals and families to include in my research. Some people volunteered to help me. During various conversations about my work, several friends and colleague spontaneously talked about their own families and some told me I should talk to their families if I wanted to understand 'marriage' more deeply. Other opportunities arose at random. While visiting a school friend at hospital she asked me to come and talk to her about what it was like to marry without parental consent. "I can teach you a few things for your study" she said and I was glad to learn from her. When I attended a school reunion I reconnected with a friend I had not seen in over 20 years. When I asked her how she was, she responded: *"work, work work; trying to manage the husband is more work!"* It was an unusual response and I was curious. I remembered her rural background and I was also curious to know how she had settled into urban middle-class life. During a dinner party hosted by a friend a discussion about my work prompted a couple to share their experience with horoscopes, marriage, and divorce who then volunteered to be interviewed if I was interested. For a while the families I was interviewing were all from the Central highlands and I wanted to interview families from the South. I approached a friend who I knew was from the South. Although she lived overseas, Roshini spoke to her aunts and cousins during a visit to Sri Lanka and explained my study to them. I had met some of her family at various times,

but even the others I had not met welcomed me warmly as 'Roshini's friend'. When I was finding it difficult to find older men to talk to, I approached a neighbour who I regularly chatted to. He said he was "honoured"' to help me learn.

There were also times when people at the end of an interview offered to introduce me to 'interesting' members of their family or friends. 'Interesting' usually meant people whose lives were considered to be different from their own. It had also to do with an 'interesting' life story—someone who they thought was a remarkable character by virtue of having faced difficult challenges in their life. I also began to judge the success of my interviews from these offers of help. I believe I had managed to build enough trust to reassure them I was not a threat to their family and friends, and that I would not exploit the relationship to 'dig out' information people were not prepared to discuss. I also believe this offer stemmed from a feeling of satisfaction, even pleasure, we often feel after a good conversation. Many people conveyed through their daughters or nieces that they had enjoyed the conversation they had with me, and younger people responded to the e-mails I wrote thanking them by saying it was the first time they had reflected on their lives in depth and had learnt something in the process . I believe the life history method makes people's life stories unique and perhaps even remarkable in the telling of it. I will discuss how different kinds of narratives are deployed in the presentation of the self in a later chapter. What I want to highlight here is that the interview provides an opportunity to construct a life story. Moreover, an attentive listener enables not only the telling of it, but also signifies its importance. Patai (1991) recounts a similar experience during her fieldwork. She states that the willingness with which people spoke about themselves indicated to her "that the opportunity to talk about one's life, to reflect on its shapes and patterns, to make sense of it oneself and to another human being, was an intrinsically valuable experience" (p.142).

There is the danger of course that acting from within my social network limited the scope to include only those who came from my own background—English-speaking, elite- Colombo-school-educated, middle-class. Colombo is home to a rich heterogeneous culture where all the major ethnic and religious groups in the country,

as well as a range of sub-groups are represented in its population. Both at school and the workplace people come in contact with many different groups. Even if someone came from an extremely conservative family where class and caste consciousness prevented them from associating freely with others, I believe heterogeneity marks many of the social networks of my generation. I approached a variety of middle-class families by drawing from my friends and colleagues from school, university, and several workplaces I had been in. Therefore my respondents represent the diversity of the sub-category I had selected from the middle-class families living in Colombo.

3.3 The Privilege of Relationships

Being an 'insider' meant that older people usually felt comfortable about inviting me into their home and treating me like a known guest not an unknown stranger. Knowing me meant that they could play the part of the willing host welcoming an expected guest. I experienced what Sri Lankan hospitality was all about during these visits. Tea or fresh juice was served with special sweet or savoury snacks. When they found out that I was pregnant, I was given fruit from their gardens or extra food to take home with me. Some made me promise I would come back for a 'proper' meal, which I did. Being known also meant that the proper forms of address between the older and younger generations could be used. I called older people 'aunty' or 'uncle' and they called me *duva* (daughter). If I was a stranger, they would have avoided addressing me making the encounter distant and impersonal. This familiarity reduced the awkwardness and hesitancies that often marks a preliminary conversation between two people. We usually chatted about the person we both knew and then, because we both knew some information about each other's lives, asked specific questions. They would usually inquire after my son: *who cared for him when I was out of the house? Did I have a reliable maid to keep an eye on him while I worked? Was he naughty?* In turn I would ask them about a specific interest I knew like gardening or an event like a visit from a child living overseas. This preliminary chit-chat easily transitioned into the interview with older people usually saying, *"Now why don't you start asking me what you want to know."* This gave me the opportunity to give them an overview of my research and start the formal interview. The interview ended with

another round of chit-chat. But this time, with a more personal connection established, they felt far more comfortable asking me more personal questions: *did I marry after 'getting friendly'; how did I meet my husband? Did I have good relations with my in-laws?* I always answered these questions honestly.

The sharing of personal information from my life, however, was not limited to the beginning and end of the interview. Often the interview was more a conversation between the respondent and me. As the life history method dictates I usually asked an opening question—'tell me about your childhood and how you grew up', followed later by,—'tell me how you got married.' Once they completed their stories I would ask specific questions. After a few interviews I found that it was difficult to expect people to keep talking with little input from me. Very soon the narrative would falter despite my promptings with the answers becoming shorter and shorter making it seem like a structured interview. I had an intuitive sense that I had to participate more actively in the interview and this did not mean asking more interesting questions, but sharing information from my own life. Gradually the interview shifted to a more conversational style. I found that sharing titbits about my own family's experiences with early marriages and malefic horoscopes encouraged people to share more. Even with people of my own generation I found myself empathising with their struggles with restrictive school rules or conflicts with mothers while growing-up. Conveying that I understood at a deeper level what they were talking about reinforced my 'insider' position.

3.4 Difficulties and Complications

Being an 'insider' is not without its complications. Chavez (2008) discusses how, while interviewing members of her own family for her study on Hispanic family histories, the traditional individual interview style conflicted with the community's style of interaction. She talks about how upon entering a home she could not insist on a private interview, but had to contend with other family members joining in because they interpreted her coming as a family visit. I too found it hard to insist on privacy during interviews when other members of the family were present. To say outright 'I

want to talk to you alone' would have implied that I was going to ask awkward questions. Some understood that an interview meant a private conversation and scheduled it when husbands and children were out of the house; or they made sure that we sat out on a porch or veranda with the front door closed. But this was not always possible. Family members walked in and out making the interviewee self-conscious sometimes, which resulted in breaks in the narrative. The flow of the narrative was also interrupted by family members demanding attention from the respondent, the telephone, the interviewee getting up to prepare tea. Sometimes a member walking into the house during the interview would join in. As I was a guest perhaps they felt compelled to chat to me. A couple of times I had other members start their own stories which I felt powerless to interrupt. These sometimes turned into a dialogue between respondents rather than a conversation with me. At first I found these interruptions frustrating, but soon realised that they provided a glimpse into people's routines, and also provided valuable insights into their lives.

There were also interviewees where a second person was constantly present. A respondent—Thushari—had suggested I interview her mother-in-law because she felt her life-story was a remarkable one. The mother-in-law scheduled the interview at Thushari's home and Thushari sat through the entire interview. Chitranganie's story—which I recount in detail in chapter seven—was an extremely emotional narrative of a lifetime of unhappiness and tragedy. I am unsure how her telling of it was affected by Thushari's presence, but I was able to observe how they sometimes told the story together with Thushari sometimes picking up where Chitranganie would leave off. There were a few times when the request for an interview about marriage was interpreted as a joint interview. Husbands and wives spoke to me together making it difficult to extract a personal narrative. In the end it was an interesting conversation with two people, but the presence of the other meant that I could not explore in-depth certain personal issues. In one instance I had travelled three hours out of Colombo to a husband and wife of a family whose history I was tracing. They had felt they were *"not qualified enough"* to provide the kind of information they thought I was looking for with regards to Sinhala marriage customs and their family history. Hence, they had invited a retired school teacher who had authored a book on the history of that

particular town to talk to me. I had to conduct an interview with three people and I struggled to salvage what seemed like an impossible situation. I realised after a few hesitant questions that the couple were unwilling to talk about their life except in the most general of terms in front of the teacher. The interview then became a general and eventually an interesting debate between the three of them about how marriage practices had changed in the South, especially with regards to caste and class. As I had travelled so far, I decided to hang around until just before lunchtime when I would have to leave without compelling my hosts to invite me for lunch. Finally the two men left saying they had other engagements—something I was hoping would eventually happen—giving me about an hour alone with the woman. As soon as they left with very little prompting, Darshini proceeded to talk to me about her life sharing many intimate details about hers and other marriages in the family, and even showed me several wedding albums and I left feeling the trip had not been a waste after all.

Galappatti (2004) points out that how his informants related to him significantly impacted the scope of his research. As a Sri Lankan, Sinhala, Buddhist, middle-class man his respondents expected him to conduct himself according to local social conventions. As a result, Galappatti says his "fieldwork process was therefore driven by judgements that were informed as much as by the ethics of good social practice in Sri Lanka as by the ethics of good research practice in British anthropology" (p.15). Hence, Galappatti found that he could not extend his fieldwork beyond the households he had been introduced to by his sponsor. To do so would have meant transgressing the unspoken conditions of the sponsorship and fracture the relationship he had formed with this sponsor as well as the relationships Galappatti had formed during his fieldwork. As mentioned before, as an insider I discovered that men were often inaccessible to me. In almost all the families I interviewed, I noticed that the relationship between fathers and children were more formal than those with mothers and children, and people tended to maintain a certain emotional distance from their fathers. Emotional issues were often discussed or battled out with the mother who usually acted as the messenger between the father and children when important information had to be conveyed. I found it difficult to even request an interview with older men because neither their wives nor their children were willing to ask them on

my behalf. When I contacted Subhashini—one of my key contacts—about interviewing men in her family, she was happy to ask her husband and brother, but hesitated when it came to her father. She told me he was not the "type of person who talks about these things." A conversation about a personal issue like marriage between an older man and a younger woman was not the norm; I could not hope to be the exception to the rule. Even with men of my own generation, there were some men who were reluctant to meet me alone and felt more comfortable talking to me in their wives' presence. A number of single and divorced men chatted to me freely and shared many confidences. The fact that I was married with children probably made it less awkward as meeting an unmarried woman in a public place could imply something other than friendship.

4 The Question of Ethics

In this section I consider the question Stacey (1991) poses —'can there be a feminist ethnography?'—in light of what I have discussed thus far about being an indigenous anthropologist. Stacey argues that there is an inherent contradiction between feminist ethics and methodologies that makes informants more vulnerable exposing them to "a deeper, more dangerous form of exploitation" than conventional research methods (p.113). She shows how the ethnographic research process, which depends on developing relationships and encouraging intimacy, places the informant in a vulnerable position, making them open to potential manipulation and betrayal during the fieldwork process.[19] Indigenous feminist anthropologists have written extensively about insider positionality and the ramifications it has on the scope and direction of their research, as well as in shaping their presentation and discovery of their own 'self'. Very little, however, is said about the ethical dilemmas arising from studying one's own community where access to information is predicated on close relationships—associations that often predate the research project, which, I believe, increases the chances of exposure and betrayal. What specifically concerns me are the ethical issues

[19] See Patai (1991) for a discussion on the ethics of being a feminist anthropologist in the context of poverty. Also, Tuhiwai Smith (1999) and Patai (1991) for a discussion on the politics of being an indigenous feminist anthropologist within the academy.

arising out of studying one's own community, where 'community' does not mean the wider society of one's home country, but actually refers to one's own group, i.e., family, neighbours, and friends. According to Huisman (2008), the tensions indigenous feminist anthropologists face unsettle the core values that characterise feminist research—reciprocity and reflexivity. As discussed in section three, reciprocity challenges the traditional hierarchical relationship between researchers and their participants and advocates that it should be equal and mutually beneficial, while reflexivity underscores the importance of reflecting on issues of power and positionality.

There are a significant number of anthropologists who return to their home countries to conduct research (*cf.* Altorki 1988; Joseph 1988; Narayan 1993; Parameswaran 2001).[20] Quite a number of 'returnees' choose to study their own communities and use their extended families and neighbours as their research subjects.[21] Almost all of them reflect on the hospitality that is extended to them by virtue of their being 'one of them' and the relative ease with which they are integrated into the social universe they wish to study. Many are careful to highlight the reciprocal nature of the relationships they form. There seems to be a reluctance, however, to reflect on the fundamentally instrumental nature of these relationships. For example, Altorki (1988) reflects on how gaining the confidence of her extended family in Saudi Arabia required the patient nurturing of friendships. For her the question of ethics in divulging information about their "innermost experiences" hitherto hidden from outsiders due to their elite status (p.60), is 'resolved' in, what I believe, two contradictory ways. Firstly, the power disparity between her informants and herself is bridged, according to Altorki, through her complete immersion in her family's "network of reciprocal exchanges of services, visits, and gifts" (p.60). Secondly, the potential for guilt and betrayal stemming from "divulging information told in the confidence of friendship and intimacy" is managed by the "saving effect of distance inherent in [her] role as a researcher" (p.61). In other words, Altorki believes that she overcomes the power-

[20] Some may have never spent time in their native countries due to migration, but have links through parents; others may have moved away during their childhood and have memories of growing up in their native homes; and some, having grown-up in their country of birth, are now domiciled in the West

[21] *Cf.* Altorki (1988) Joseph (1988); Sherif (2001)

differential inherent in the research relationship by integrating completely into the kinship structure of her family, but at the same time she draws attention to the distance she maintains to justify her using these relationships for her research. Altorki sidesteps several ethical issues that I believe researchers studying their own communities must confront.

Narayan (1993) argues that because anthropologists "problematize lived reality," this inevitably creates distance between the researcher and their subjects (p.671). For the indigenous anthropologist studying her own community, which includes family, friends, and associates, such a distance is often assumed at the point of writing when the researcher steps back to interpret emerging themes and patterns. This does not, however, necessarily draw clear-cut boundaries within on-going relationships. Managing these boundaries as the researcher steps back from, even as she continues to live within, the society she is part of places the indigenous anthropologist in a unique situation. It demands sensitivity to the on-going dynamics of relationships that she will continue to conduct during and after the project. Narayan (1993) proposes that the indigenous anthropologist should be seen "in terms of shifting identifications amid a field of interpenetrating communities and power relations" (p.671). She argues that such a position acknowledges that the "the loci along which we are aligned with or set apart from those who we study are multiple and in flux" (ibid). I agree with Visweswaran (1996a) who is cautious about presenting identities as multidimensional and pluralistic that allows us to choose which identity to privilege at what moment. "Identities," Visweswaran argues, "no matter how strategically deployed, are not always chosen, but are in fact constituted by relations of power always historically determined" (p.8). As mentioned earlier, I found that I had very little choice in presenting myself within a group where my identity was, for the most part, already established. It is how I chose to negotiate differences between my participants and myself by engaging in meaningful dialogue and paying attention to the quality of relationship that ultimately mattered.

Making one's position and objectives as a researcher explicit at the outset elides the fundamentally differential basis on which relationships in the field are formed. Patai

(1991) points out that regardless of how much is invested in the relationship,

> the split between the subject and object on which all research depends […]imply that objectification, the utilization of others for one's own purposes […]and the possibility of exploitation, are built into almost all research projects with living human beings (p.139).

Kondo (1986) makes a similar argument when she notes that even the most sensitive ethnographic inquiry tends to privilege "referential content" over "meaningful interactions" with people who are very often friends and companions (p.83). In such a context, is it then acceptable to take advantage of people's sense of obligation to the researcher who may be a relative, friend, or neighbour? Should the researcher take for granted the generous offer of hospitality such people graciously extend and interpret this as consent to explore and finally analyse the most personal aspects of their lives? While the researcher is acutely aware that trust must be gained through extending the hand of friendship, such a gesture, I believe, cannot be reciprocated by informants with the research relationship foremost in mind. Friendship has a particular cultural meaning and is usually extended within that cultural context. Usually, not just prolonged contact and reciprocity, but a deeper sense of connection with another leads to friendship where one feels safe in sharing intimacies. Ethnography, it seems to me, takes friendship out of its usual social context, and supplants it within a research context transforming friendships and relationships into inherently instrumental encounters. This is clearly fore-grounded when an anthropologist believes she has been trusted with intimate information, but confesses that she cannot be completely honest about her personal life for fear of being judged (*cf.* Abu-Lughod 1986/1999; Sherif 2001). When participants offer hospitality and later friendship, they do so from a place of generosity despite the "symbolic violence" the anthropologist perpetrates through her intrusion into people's lives for the sake of her project (Kondo 1986, p.83). Kondo and others suggest maintaining contacts with the group by frequently returning to the field. This does not, however, adequately resolve the ethical conundrums inherent in studying one's own community.

How much more complicated is then the position of the indigenous researcher who converts her long established relationships into research subjects? When it became

clear to me that my research would focus on people from my various social networks, my first reaction was to feel an enormous sense of gratitude. As discussed earlier, many had spontaneously offered to help me even though I had not explicitly requested their help. Even with those who I had explicitly asked, the positive feedback I received following the interviews made me believe that I was not coercing people into becoming my informants by manipulating my prior relationships with them. Nevertheless, I was aware that many felt a sense of obligation to help me. The obligation people feel to help someone they know is 'positively' valued in Sri Lanka. Yet, such a sense makes it difficult to unravel how 'consent' can be understood in a research context. Within a few months my organizer was full with appointments. I had to sometimes excuse myself from interview conversations that seemed to extend indefinitely because I needed to be home with my family. Many indigenous anthropologists re-enter their communities after many years of being away and the reasons for their return is articulated in terms of their research objectives. It is obvious, although not unproblematic, that their primary role will be that of a researcher, however much their close relationships with people may seem to belie such a position. Despite my satisfaction with how my fieldwork was progressing, I could not avoid the niggling feeling that I had blurred the boundaries between friendship and research. This became even clearer during the analysis process when I found it hard to differentiate between what I already knew from years of sharing intimacies from what was gathered during the interview encounter. Even though I returned to England to write, I was unable to draw a neat line under my fieldwork. My on-going interactions with friends and associates continued to inform my analyses.

The indigenous anthropologist also faces specific problems with the ethic of confidentiality. I made a conscious effort to maintain confidentiality by stressing to my friends and associates that I would not divulge the fact that I was talking to their families when we met socially within the wider groups we encountered each other. When I met friends at social gatherings it felt awkward to deliberately avoid disclosing to the others in the group that a different level of interaction was taking place between myself and a friend turned informant. Quite often I had to feign ignorance about information I was actually already privy to when they came up in general

conversation. What is crucial to highlight is that by choosing to study my own community, maintaining confidentiality requires collusion from others. I took great pains to explain to my key contacts that I had assured their families of confidentiality and that this meant that they could not disclose their families' involvement in my research to our mutual friends and contacts. So, if a friend revealed, however innocently, that I had talked to her mother, confidentiality was immediately compromised. Moreover, as an anthropologist who would continue to live at home, I had to be scrupulous about issues of confidentiality if I was going to share my research within the academic community. If anyone knew the identities of even some of my research subjects, there was a possibility that they would start associating certain stories with particular people. I also had to be selective about the kind of information I revealed about my participants in order to ensure they will not be easily recognised by readers. I soon realised that confidentiality is not just an ethical principle one adhered to but an on-going negotiation within a relationship. I know that this means that I will continue to be vulnerable to others' disclosures about my informants. Patai (1991) points out that there are no "generic solutions" that can be captured within exact rules; "ethical problems emerge in concrete human contexts, contexts that are always specific and always material […]Ethics is a matter not of abstractly correct behaviour, but of relations between people" (p.145).

Indigenous anthropologists stress the principle of accountability in resolving the ethical issues they face. Narayan (1993) believes that the instrumental relationship between researcher and informant can be considerably reduced by regular returns to a field site. Such visits, according to Narayan, , "can nourish the growth of responsible human ties and the subsuming of cultural differences within the fellowship of a 'We-relation,'" which also helps to reconsider anthropological work from the point of view of the people it represent (p.677). Narayan also proposes that we should focus on

> the quality of relations with the people we seek to represent in our texts: are they viewed as mere fodder for professionally self-serving statements about a generalized Other? Or are they accepted as subjects with voices, views, and dilemmas—people to who are boded through ties of reciprocity and who may even be critical of our professional enterprise? (p.672)

Kondo (1986) asserts that the indigenous anthropologist in identifying with the 'other' can be more sympathetic and sensitive to "the violence done to the richness of human experience by the coldly distant, so-called 'objective' language of social science" (p.83). Kondo also believes that such sensitivity can result in informants having a greater voice and role in shaping the research and fashioning the text, which in turn could result in the revision of anthropological approaches and epistemologies. Abu-Lughod (1993/2008), suggests the strategy of 'writing against culture' where the tendency to generalise the 'other' is replaced by 'ethnographies of the particular.' She points out that indigenous feminist anthropologists face issues of multiple accountability: to anthropologists and feminists within the academy as well as educated groups within their own communities and also one's research subjects. Abu-Lughod argues that multiple accountability demands that the indigenous feminist anthropologist "speak[s] with a complex awareness of an investment in reception" and is forced "to confront squarely the politics and ethics of representation (p.142). Stacey (1991) argues that "while there cannot be a fully feminist ethnography, there can be […] ethnographies that are partially feminist, accounts of culture […] [that] should be rigorously self-aware and therefore humble about the partiality of its ethnographic vision and its capacity to represent self and other" (p.117). And this type of 'partial ethnography', Stacey believes, is "worth the serious moral costs involved" (ibid).

Continuing to live within my 'field-site' makes the issue of accountability an on-going process both in the realm of relationships and the ethics of representation. Although during and immediately after my fieldwork I worried that I had blurred the boundaries of close relationships by using people I knew in my research, the fact that none of the relationships with my key contacts have, thus far, been negatively affected has allayed my fears. In fact, in most cases the quality of relationships has deepened because I became involved with their extended families and continue to keep in touch with them intermittently. In writing, I have endeavoured to present the 'voices, views, and dilemmas' of my informants without subordinating them to impersonal and abstract analysis. I have also included as many of the people I interviewed as possible, as a way of respecting the stories they shared.

5 Conclusion

Ethnographic fieldwork is undoubtedly 'a rite of passage' for the student entering the field of anthropology. It forces everyone, feminist, indigenous, foreign —to confront the challenges, limitations, and ethics of conducting research within a context of personal relationships. Unlike the often solitary and isolated experience of writing where these issues are reflected upon in philosophical terms, in the field the researcher is forced to resolve them in 'real' time. How we present the 'self', how we treat others, how we read people's expectations, and how we respond to questions about the future of the relationship cannot be deferred. In resolving these questions the anthropologist must be aware of the instrumental nature of friendships formed during fieldwork and work out how they are to be negotiated once fieldwork is completed. Patai (1991) describes the feminist interview as a 'bracketed moment' in which the social context of the world outside is suspended for a while (p.138). For the researcher returning to the academic institution where she must face the deadlines of writing, fieldwork can seem like a 'bracketed moment'. The academic context can easily take precedence over the social context in which one conducted fieldwork. This is perhaps the greatest challenge a researcher faces—how to take seriously the questions we raise in our writing in how we conduct ourselves in the 'field'. Feminists and others provide several guidelines on how to meet the challenge of ethical practice. The answer is perhaps to be found, not so much in theoretical debates, but in the principles that underline how we conduct all our relationships.

3 – Gender, Nationalism, and Caste-Class Relations in Sri Lanka

Establishing the Context

1. Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to establish the context for my discussion of marriage in contemporary Sri Lanka, specifically the marriage practices of the Sinhala-Buddhist urban middle-class living in the capital city of Colombo. It intends to give background to the nuances of class and caste relations that are negotiated around marriage, and to understand why caste continues to have symbolic value in delineating difference and asserting status in the context of marriage even today—a discussion I take up in chapter seven. In this chapter I provide a historical overview of the emergence of class in the nineteenth century with the development of a capitalist economy and discuss the significant impact it had in changing the criteria for successful marriage alliances amongst the Sinhalese. By examining some of the specificities of class formation in Sri Lanka, I hope to shed some light on why class did not entirely dislocate the significance of caste. In delineating the variegated threads that were woven into class formation, namely colonialism and nationalism, I also intend to provide the background to the creation of the 'ideal Sinhala woman' and the production of a specifically gendered code of behaviour.

I begin with a brief overview of the demography and history of the country highlighting the ways in which the island is depicted in the development literature as being 'different' than her South Asian neighbours. In the following section I discuss the Sinhalese caste-system and caste relations as it applies to marriage. I then engage in a more in-depth discussion of class. I examine how the intersection of gender, nationalism, and class is critical to understanding marriage practices in contemporary Sri Lanka. I illustrate how the history of colonisation and nationalism wrought complex changes in women's lives focusing specifically on how these discourses produced an ideal of the Sinhala woman.

Sri Lanka – an Overview

Sri Lanka is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country with a population of 20 million, of which 74.9 percent are Sinhalese and 70.2 percent are Buddhists (Department of Census and Statistics 2011). In addition to the Sinhala-Buddhist majority who dominate the socio-cultural and political landscape of the country, Sri Lanka is home to Tamils, Moors, Burghers, and several other minorities whose primary religious orientations are Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity. Prior to European colonisation from the early sixteenth century onwards, Sri Lanka was organized around several overlapping kingdoms, which were intermittently unified under a single monarch. Its geography as an island in close proximity to the Indian sub-continent meant that throughout history Sri Lanka has maintained a unique identity even as she was receptive to the religious, cultural, political, and economic influence of her neighbours. Sri Lanka's geographic location in the Indian Ocean on several regional and transcontinental trade routes meant that she had contact with south-east Asia, west Asia, and also the civilisations of Greece and Rome, and perhaps even Egypt. Sri Lanka was first subject to European colonisation by the Portuguese in the early sixteenth century followed by the Dutch in the mid-seventeenth century both of who mainly ruled the Western and South-western coastal areas of the island. It was under the British, who ousted the Dutch in the early part of the eighteenth century that the entire island was brought under colonial rule. In 1815 the British captured the Kandyan kingdom of the central highlands, thereby ending the rule of kings. The influence of more than four-hundred years of colonialism along with the impact of the response and resistance to colonialism through various strategies, especially the formation of ethno-religious identities, continues to pervade all aspects of Sri Lankan life today (de Silva 2005; Jayawardena 1995, 2000; Wickramasinghe 2006).

Sri Lanka is often discussed in the development literature as a 'special case' in South Asia. From very early on in its post-independent history, the country has been hailed as 'Asia's Ireland' and a 'development model' for South Asia for her achievements in the education, employment, and health sectors (Caldwell et al 1989; de Silva 1990). More recently, Sri Lanka was declared a middle-income emerging economy by the

International Monetary Fund (Central Bank of Sri Lanka 2012; IMF 2010), and is classified under the "high human development" category in the 2013 Human Development Index (UNDP 2013). That a majority of these narratives and indices use 'gender' as a signifier of progress is part of the rhetoric and politics of modernity discussed in chapter one.[22] In Sri Lanka it has resulted in a 'feminist conundrum' (Ruwanpura 2006). In addition to having had several high-profile women leaders, including the world's first female prime-minister, the performance indicators for women are some of the highest in South Asia (CENWOR 2000; Jayaweera 1999). Moreover, in the absence of practices like dowry death, female infanticide, and honour killings, Sri Lanka is generally thought to have more egalitarian gender relations than elsewhere in the sub-continent. Sri Lanka is, in fact, ranked at number 75 in the UNDP's Gender Inequality Index and, with the exception of the Maldives, is significantly ahead of her neighbours (UNDP 2013). Seneviratne (1999) suggests that the influence of Buddhism has had a significant impact on the socio-cultural life of the Sinhalese and "is possibly the best explanation of the relatively greater societal liberalism" (p.17). The egalitarian and populist traditions of Buddhism, in contrast to the religious elitism of Hinduism and Islam, according to Seneviratne, have resulted in: literacy being encouraged amongst the masses, a "milder" form of caste relations, greater property rights for women, and less extreme forms gender inequality and violence against women.

Positive macro-level indicators do not reflect, however, some of the micro-level inequalities in the country. Sri Lanka has one of the lowest rates of women's political participation (Leitan 1990), one of the highest rates of suicide (Maracek and Senadheera 2012), and a high incidence of violence against women (CENWOR 2000). In addition, income inequality, high inflation, high unemployment rates among educated youth, the poor quality of health and social services especially in the Northern and Eastern districts—the main 'battleground' where the ethnic conflict was fought, are some of the key issues that continue to beset the island (Hettige and Salih

[22] As White (2010) argues, "women's empowerment is a value identified with the liberal universalist tradition and codified in particular ways within understandings of international development [and] is intimately bound up with the geo-political dominance of Western powers (p.335).

2010).[23] More recently, the international community has placed a spotlight on the state's dubious human rights performance in the final stages of the conflict and also in the present post-conflict reconstruction phase.

Although a critique of the development literature that perpetually unearths contradictions in attempting to resolve the puzzle of 'tradition' and 'modernity' is beyond the purview of my thesis, the 'feminist conundrum' nevertheless provides an interesting backdrop against which to read caste-class relations in Sri Lanka and how gender is implicated in the production and reproduction of class.

2. The Sinhalese Caste System

There are three main caste-based distinctions that are made by the Sinhalese today. These demarcations have a specific historical basis and, despite the enormous socio-economic and political changes that has radically altered the landscape of social relations in Sri Lanka from the nineteenth century onwards, they continue to play a significant role even in the twenty-first century, if not in general social relations, certainly in the domain of marriage. They are: the separation of people into 'high' and 'low' caste groups; the cultural differences attributed to those living in the southern lowlands—*pahataraṭa* or 'low-country' people—in contrast to those originating from the central highlands of the Kandyan kingdom—*udaraṭa* or 'Kandyans'; and the assertion of aristocratic status by the *Radala* sub-caste of the *Goyigama* group from the highlands who held the highest officers and rank in the Kandyan Kingdom. These distinctions are merely alluded to by the urban middle-class in their everyday conversations about distinction and difference, but take on a more serious timbre when it comes to matters of marriage because of the emphasis on compatibility, and also because of the desire for social mobility through marriage, which I will discuss in d□□□□□□ □□□□□□r □□r. I will provide a brief explanation of the Sinhalese caste structure and a historical overview of caste relations

[23] The roots of the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka dates back at least to the early years of independence. The civil-war between Tamil militants and the Sri Lankan state representing mainly the Sinhala-Buddhist majority commenced in the early 1980s and ended in May 2009.

in order to establish the necessary context to understand why these particular caste-based distinctions continue to prevail.

2.1. The Sinhalese Caste System and Caste Relations

The caste system of the Sinhalese is contrasted to the Hindu system in the Indian subcontinent in two main ways.[24] The first is that caste is not an integral part of the religious system of the Sinhalese mainly because of the influence of Buddhism, which has weakened the sacred sanctions of caste in Sri Lanka (Jiggins 1979; Raghavan 1961; Ryan 1953/2004).[25] [26] The second difference between the two systems is the absence of the two higher castes of the Hindu system in the Sinhalese caste structure (Davy 1821/2006, pp.111-112; Peiris 1956, p.171).[27] The Sinhalese system is a simpler bi-partite scheme in which the two lower groups are said to be in existence to the almost exclusion of the two higher groups (Davy 1821/2006, pp.111-112; Peiris 1956, p.171). The cultivators and shepherds—known as the *Goyigama* caste group—correspond to the *Vaishyas* and were known as the 'good' people; the rest of the population—the more functional service groups—were classified as 'low caste' (Davy 1821/2006; Knox 1681/1989; Peiris 1956; Raghavan 1961; Ryan 1953/2004).[28] It must be noted that very little is known of the structure and function of the caste system prior to the Kandyan Kingdom, which was founded in the late fifteenth century and lasted until the

[24] Some scholars maintain that the Sinhalese social system is ultimately a model of the Hindu system in India as it evolved from the different waves of migration from the sub-continent; others posit that although the Sinhalese system may have reflected the Hindu model in the distant past, it soon evolved into something distinctive as a result of historically unique situations (*cf.* Jiggins 1979; Raghavan 1961; Ryan 1953/2004).

[25] The Buddha's teachings emphasised that a person's virtue depended on his/her deeds, not his/her birth or wealth, and people from all castes, including the 'lowest' castes, were admitted to the Sangha—the community of the Buddhist order (*cf. Sutta-nipâta 142 - Vasala Sutta; Chāndogya Upaniṣad*). However, in Sri Lanka, the three Buddhist orders (*Nikāyas*) are divided on caste lines, with only the Ramanna *Nikāya* admitting people from all castes.

[26] Dumont's (1966/1980) strong identification of caste and Hindu religion in India is contested by Beteille (1967) and Burghart (1996). They argue that the fact that castes are found across all religious groups is an indication that caste is cultural rather than purely religious in basis.

[27] In the Hindu system, the Brahmin priests stand at the pinnacle of the caste system; beneath them were the *Kshaitriyas*—the royal or warrior caste; followed by the *Vaishyas*—the merchants, cultivators, and shepherds; and the *Shudra*—low castes (Davy 1821/2006, p.111).

[28] As in the Hindu system, some groups—namely the *Rodiyas* and beggars—were classified as 'outcastes' and were forbidden from living amongst the other caste groups and having sustained social relations with them (Jiggins 1979; Knox 1681/1989; Ryan 1953/2004). Unlike in India, the outcaste group was more a secular taboo than a religious proscription (Ryan 1953 (2004), p.17).

British conquest in 1815.[29] Davy (1821/2006) records that caste was organized around services to the King's court, ritual duties to the temple, and everyday services in the community (p.115).[30] Leach (1961) posits that majority of the present day castes are historically derived from the particular economic roles that groups filled in the feudally organized Kandyan Kingdom (p.68). Spencer (1990/1999) argues that the history of caste in Sri Lanka remains obscure given that no scholarship has offered a convincing explanation for its existence on the island. He asserts that "the persistence of caste […], without kings and royal service, or Brahmans, or purity and impurity, or untouchables, remains something of a mystery" (p.187). According to Spencer the best explanation is provided by Hocart's model of caste "as a division of liturgical labour based on the idea of service to the King" (ibid). In more recent times in Sinhalese villages where the temple is the focal point of religious and social life, Spencer explains that "the religious institution […] has taken the place of—but retained the focal role of—the monarch" (ibid).

The *Goyigama* caste has been historically the largest and highest ranking group among the Sinhala people (Davy 1821/2006; Knox 1681/1989). The term '*Govi'* literally means 'cultivator' and the group's main occupation was the cultivation of rice—the main staple of the Sinhalese. According to Davy (1821/2006), although agriculture was their main occupation, the *Goyigama* people held a privileged place in society because "they monopolize[d] all the honours of the church and state, and possess[ed] all the hereditary rank in the country" (p.113). In the Kandyan kingdom the King's highest rank of officials were chosen from the *Goyigama* group and given honorific titles and crown land. These particular families constituted the governing elite who came to be known as *Radalavaru* and were distinguished from the middle-ranks of the caste group (Peiris 1956; Ryan 1953/2004). The Sinhalese feudal system was also characterised by the unequal relationship between landlords and tenants *within* the *Goyigama* group, which was governed by rights, duties, and the performance of ceremonial duties (Obeyesekere 1967). Hence, norms pertaining to power, prestige, and authority, both

[29] Raghavan (1961) provides a structural functional explanation for the rise of caste in Sri Lanka's history. He argues that with the changing needs of an evolving society came the rise of vocational groups and with time a more pronounced structure of functional units (p.61).

[30] Peiris (1956) notes that with the exception of a few of the low-caste groups, all others were associated with a specific occupation that was attached to a state 'department' (p.181).

in inter- and intra-caste relations, were structured through the feudal system (ibid). Furthermore, while the high-caste status of the *Goyigama* group as a whole is said to be based on tradition and commonly accepted, the hierarchy of the lower orders is a matter of conjecture (Davy 1821/2006; Knox 1681/1989; Peiris 1956).[31]

The fluidity and mutability of the caste structure notwithstanding, inter-caste relations were defined by custom and social usage and caste-hierarchy was maintained in social relations (Peiris 1956). Knox (1681/1989) records that social distance between caste groups was maintained through the prohibition of sharing meals in the private domain of the household, and through the regulation of dress, seating, and forms of address in the public domain (p.199).) Ryan (1953/2004) argues that the Sinhalese caste avoidance did not apply to all social relationships, but were most pronounced in the context of "home, family, and food" (p.20). He further asserts that the caste system in Sri Lanka was not a formal organization, but more a boundary line demarcating communal life (p.16). Writing about caste-relations in the late-1940s, Ryan observes that in day-to-day social relations people did not seem to harbour any bitterness towards the hierarchy as caste affiliation was considered a "natural" fact, with the majority believing that "honourable birth merits greater respect than position earned through achievement" (p.208). Spencer (1990/1999) concurs with Ryan that caste "is not, and possibly never was, the fundamental ordering principle of local social life" in Sri Lanka (p.190). Caste, Spencer argues, "was but one indication of social standing—with kin ties, place of birth and residence, and source of income" also playing a role in how hierarchy was determined (p.191).

Caste endogamy, however, was said to be strictly maintained for both men and women. The principle of hypergamy dictated that while women from lower sub-castes were permitted to marry men from higher status groups, women were prohibited from

[31] Peiris (1956), writing on the social order prevalent during the Kandyan kingdom, asserts that while "there was no doubt about the superiority of the 'good people', the rank of the lower caste groups "was far from being a clearly defined hierarchy in which the various castes were graded in an immutable order of precedence" (p.176). For example, Knox (1681/1989, pp.202-209) classification varies from Davy's (1821/2006, p.112). Ryan (1953) attributes these differences partly to the divide between the interior and coastal regions and partly to the assimilation of tribal groups into the regional caste-structure at various periods in history.

marrying men from the lower ranks of the caste-group (Davy 1821/2006; Knox 1681/1989; Peiris 1956; Yalman 1967).[32] According to the Sinhalese, children received caste-blood from both parents and either parent could pollute the child (Yalman 1967, p.140). Knox (1681/1989) describes caste for the Sinhalese was a matter of descent and blood, which was inherited, rather than being dependent on riches or rank obtained by the King (p.199). Birth status was the basis of one's role and function in society (Ryan 1953/2004, p.10). Yalman (1967) posits that an ideology of descent was tied up with ritual rank and birth status, and rank was conveyed at birth; children inherited social attributes from parents such as membership in a kinship group, caste, and status within the caste (pp.137-140). Ryan (1953/2004) notes that caste-integrity in marriage was much stronger amongst the Kandyans than in the Southern lowlands, as were the harsh sanctions if the rule of endogamy was transgressed (p.209).

2.2. Caste-based Distinctions in Contemporary Sri Lanka

As mentioned before, the Sinhalese continue to make caste-based distinctions whose roots are grounded in history. The bifurcation of the castes into those of 'high' and 'low' birth continues to be a significant marker of difference today, especially in marriage. The high-caste status of the *Goyigama* group is undisputed in both regions. What is disputed, however, is the inclusion of the *Karāwe* (fisher folk), *Salāgama* (cinnamon cultivators), and *Durāva* castes (toddy tappers) amongst the 'good' people.[33] These three caste groups are exclusive to the southern region and it is generally accepted that they form the second tier of the caste structure. What is disputed, however, is the traditional and historical basis of their claims to being on the

[32] While a *Goyigama* man could marry a woman from a lower sub-caste (*Nillemakaryea* or *Pattea*), a *Goyigama* woman could not. Davy (1821/2006) records that such marriages were occasionally practiced and "winked at" (p.115). Marrying beneath one's caste was, however, strictly prohibited for women. If they did, there are reports of such offenses being punishable by death (Harris 2001). Knox (1681/1989) reports that if such a woman appeared in the presence of her family, she would be put to death to wipe the dishonour she had brought to them (p.201). Peiris (1956) records a case from the Kandyan period where a young woman was stabbed to death by her family for being raped by a man belonging to the lowest-caste group (p.178).

[33] The boundary lines between those who occupy the middle-section are somewhat differently drawn in the central highlands than in the southern lowlands, and certain caste-groups that exist in one do not necessarily exist in the other. This is primarily because different sub-systems among the Sinhalese have prevailed in various regions of the country for several historical reasons and together they did not necessarily constitute a single social system (Gunasinghe 1996b).

right side of the boundary line dividing the 'good' people from the 'low' castes.[34] Their ascent into the higher ranks is mainly attributed to colonisation and the introduction of capitalism—i.e., the emergence of class in the 19th century— that enabled some families to move away from their traditional occupations and accumulate capital through engaging in trade and enterprise.[35] The intersection of class with caste and its impact on marriage will be discussed in detail in the next section; but what is important to highlight here is how people interpret the demarcation between 'high' and 'low' castes continues to be critical to marriage even today.

The Sinhalese also differentiate between people from the central highlands and those living in southern lowlands, whose cultural differences have a historical basis. One of the main differences being that the maritime provinces of the South were subject to colonial influence from when the Portuguese arrived in the island in 1505, while the Kandyans resisted the Portuguese and Dutch and capitulated to the British only in 1815. The 'authenticity' of the Kandyans is asserted primarily on this basis (Obeyesekere 1984/1987; Wickramasinghe 2006). Some Kandyan families continue to maintain an air of aristocratic superiority due to the distinguished titles conferred by the King, while the wealthier people of the South consider themselves more sophisticated than the traditional Kandyans (*cf.* Yalman 1967).

In addition, as I will show, the division between the elites and the non-elites within the *Goyigama* caste also continues to be a significant marker of rank and status difference today. Sub-caste divisions mainly existed among the high-caste *Goyigama* group in the Kandyan kingdom and arose out of the role distinctions made in the type of service they performed for the King (Ryan 1953/2004). Within these sub-divisions the aristocratic *Radala* group comprised the officers, courtiers, and governors that the Kandyan King appointed (Knox 1681/1989; Peiris 1956).[36] Kandyan aristocratic families

[34] According to Ryan (1953/2004), various Sinhala legends explain status variations in terms of relative virtue and sinfulness. For example, according to the *Janavamsa*, the fishing people have a low status because they are guilty of taking life without mercy (pp.12-13). Ryan argues, however, that there is no indication that religious impurity was a factor in determining status in the Sinhalese caste-hierarchy.
[35] For example, some families from the *Karāwe* (fisherfolk) group gained prominence by monopolizing the trade in the country (Davy 1821/2006, pp.122-123).
[36] Peiris argues that while some of these sub-groups maintained caste endogamy, others did not. He notes that certain occupational groups that arose to meet particular needs of the government would

(*Radala pavul*) are somewhat disdainful of the middle-level *Goyigama* families when it comes to marriage, while marrying into a Kandyan aristocratic family is often taken as a sign of social mobility by all status groups.

Caste Endogamy in Marriage – Theory and Practice

To what degree the rule of endogamy was actually practiced is explored in the ethnographic work of the mid-twentieth century (*cf.* Leach 1961; Ryan 1953; Tambiah 1965; Yalman 1967). Yalman (1962; 1963; 1967) asserts that the kinship and marriage rules of the Sinhalese system are a variation of the Dravidian structure.[37] He illustrates how bi-lateral cross-cousins marriage is preferred and the rule reflected in Sinhalese kinship terminology. Gunasinghe (1996c) and Tambiah (1965) critique Yalman for stressing kinship rules over actual marriage practices even though his field work pointed to more fluid boundaries. They also critique Yalman for disregarding the influence of land ownership and socio-economic positions of the various actors on marriage practices. Tambiah (1965) argues that while in theory cross-cousin marriage was preferred and caste endogamy was the rule, in practice people married distant relatives and inter-caste marriages were prevalent. Gunasinghe (1996c) argues that with wealth and high status, social distance between marriage partners increase; political alliances in marriage are less relevant to people from a low status group who tend to marry within the endogamous group. He posits that "when one is of high social standing one looks for political alliances, not only within the customary kin group but outside the village and in certain cases even outside the caste" (Gunasinghe 1996c, p.168). In fact, Yalman (1967) records instances when families of superior caste and rank established kinship ties with someone with doubtful ancestry. He asserts

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disappear when their positions were no longer sanctioned; hence, there was much "fission and fusion" within each major group as was the case in India (Peiris 1956, p.171).

[37] According to Dumont (1953) the Dravidian kinship system is perfectly expressed through its terminology, where distinctions are made between the sexes, age, generation, and maternal and paternal kin. Marriage is defined as an alliance between kin and affines. 'Kin' of a single generation are defined as ego's siblings as well as his/her parallel cousins (mother's sisters' children and father's brothers' children). Affines are cross-cousins, i.e., mother's brothers' children and father's sisters' children. Dumont asserts that the rule of cross-cousin marriage, taken together with the four types of distinctions made within the Dravidian system, "embodies a sociological theory of marriage" (p.39). Such a rule encompasses all relatives within the category of 'kin' and 'affines' through "bifurcate merging" (p.35) without the need for a third category. Relatives that are divided in one generation are merged in the next through marriage in a logical and systematic manner (*cf.* Yalman 1962; 1963).

that such connections were made when there was some material benefit to the adoptive family, and usually the person concerned did not have many low-ranking kinsmen in the same village. Once affinal ties were made, this in effect meant that a transition from one caste to another had successfully taken place. Yalman notes that the children would continue to have matrilateral relations with the other caste, but by the third generation the incident would have been forgotten and the boundaries of the sub-caste groups once again would appear to be impermeable (p.185).

3. Delineating 'Class'

Discussions about the impact of social change on marriage norms and practices in South Asia, and elsewhere, illustrate how class formation variously intersecting with nationalism, marketization, and religious reformism are part of the constellation of 'modernity' producing complex outcomes in the domains of marriage, kinship, and family. Amarasuriya (2010) asserts that class is "one of the most important tropes through which the social and political lives of people in Sri Lanka are experienced and articulated" and yet it remains under-researched and under-theorised in the Sri Lankan context (p.29). As I will show, class along with social mobility are critical to marriage negotiations in Sri Lanka and, therefore, needs close attention if we are to understand how they shape people's choices.

Even economists rarely focus exclusively on income levels when defining the middle-class, but include education levels, occupational status, and consumption patterns in their definitions.[38] Class is a central category in Marx's theorisation of modern capitalist societies where the bourgeoisie was defined as the owners of the means of production and the proletariat were those who provided the labour for production. 'Class' was generally thought of as the dominant form of social stratification in 'modern' societies and contrasted with 'status' in 'traditional' societies (Brow 1981). Although conceptually 'class' and 'status' are opposed in Weber's theory of 'ideal types', in historical reality they were not mutually exclusive categories (Brow 1981). In

[38] *cf.* Cruces et al (2011); Ferreira et al (2012); Lopez-Calva and Ortis-Juarez (2011)—recent World Bank studies of the middle-class.

describing the European middle-class, Weber (1948) incorporated a definition of 'class'—"stratified according to their relations to the production and acquisition of goods," with that of 'status groups'—"stratified according to the principles of their *consumption* of goods" (p.193 *emphasis in original*). Hence, according to Weber, although the economic order and social order of a society are not identical, they are in fact conditioned by each other. What is important to the present discussion is that while class signalled a shift from ascribed to achieved status, status concerns are common to both 'traditional' and 'modern' societies. According to Liechty (2003), one of the main differences between Marx's theorisation of class and that of Weber's is that by the early twentieth century the middle-classes of Europe and North America did not necessarily own the means of production, but were defined by their access to other forms of property and also through consumption—an important observation for contemporary discussions on class.

Status, according to Weber (1948), was expressed by a specific style of life, and status honour was maintained through exclusive tastes, habits, hobbies. Many decades later, Bourdieu (1984) argued that social class determines a person's tastes and preferences, and that distinctions based on social class get reinforced in people's habits and lifestyle. Based on surveys of French culture conducted in the 1960s, Bourdieu claims that tastes and preferences both in the "most legitimate areas [of culture] such as painting or music to the most 'personal' ones such as clothing, furniture, or cookery" are closely linked to a person's social origin and educational capital (p.13). Distinction between the classes is asserted through an "aesthetic", which is not only judged by people's appreciation of the fine arts, but also in applying the principles of a "pure" aesthetic in their everyday choices-- choice of food, dress, and interior decoration, for example (p.40). Both Weber and Bourdieu pointed out that the exclusivity or 'distinction' that social classes maintained often led to endogamous marriage within the group.

In the following section I will describe the emergence of the middle-class and discuss how colonialism and nationalism shaped the meaning of what it means to be 'middle-class.' I will also provide the background to why status distinctions are critical to how

the various groups *within* the middle-class distinguish themselves from each—an argument I take up in chapter seven.

3.1. Class Formation in Sri Lanka

The Colonial Period

The emergence of the middle-class in Sri Lanka is traced to the growth of capitalism from the early decades of the nineteenth century (De Silva 2005; Jayawardena 2000). While the extent of capitalist transformation brought about by the introduction of plantation agriculture by the British colonial government is debated (*cf.* Jayawardena 2000), the appearance of the modern class structure compromising the bourgeoisie, the petty bourgeoisie, and the working classes is generally accepted as resulting from the economic transformation that commenced in the 1830s (De Silva 2005; Gunasinghe 1990/2007, 1996b; Jayawardena 2000; Roberts 1974, 1997).[39] The expansion of educational opportunities through the establishment of missionary schools around the same time combined with economic change were the two principle factors driving social change in nineteenth-century Ceylon (De Silva 2005; Jayawardena 2000; Roberts 1997). The bourgeoisie that emerged at this time can be described as having the following characteristics: they acquired wealth from the new economic opportunities that were opening up mainly through plantation agriculture, the retail of liquor, and ownership of land as well as other areas of enterprise; they invested in English-language education, which opened up career opportunities in the middle and upper levels of the colonial administration; their investment in higher education overseas enabled members to enter the prestigious professions of medicine and law; and they migrated from their rural bases to the capital city of Colombo where they built lavish residences and assimilated into urban elite society through the adoption of the English language and Western dress and manners (Jayawardena 2000; Raghavan 1961; Roberts 1997).

[39] The economic stagnation that is said to have affected the country till the 1830s gradually began to change with the success of coffee and the recommendations of the Colebrook-Cameron Commission to move away from the state's trade monopolies to laissez-faire economics (De Silva 2005; Jayawardena 2000; Wickramasinghe 2006).

The growth of capitalism had given rise to a bourgeoisie that can be broadly categorised as having emerged from two distinct groups (De Silva 2005; Gunasinghe 1996a; Jayawardena 2000). In Jayawardena's (2000) terms the 'somebodies' were people of 'high' birth—those in the higher rungs of the high-caste *Goyigama* group, who had held onto political and social power during much of the colonial period, were the first to benefit from new economic educational opportunities, and used it to consolidate their status. The 'nobodies' were people of 'low' birth who made use of the same opportunities to move from their previous status as 'nobodies to somebodies'. The 'nobodies' who rose to prominence during this time were also predominantly from the Southern coastal provinces and came from the *Karāve* (fisherfolk) caste group and also to the *Salāgama* and *Durāve* caste groups who were able to take advantage of the burgeoning capitalist economy to accumulate wealth (Gunasinghe 1996b; Jayawardena 2000; Roberts 1997; Ryan 1953/2004).

What is also significant for our discussion on marriage is that the 'somebodies' at this time came from two groups. The first were the traditional elite land-holding Kandyans in the central highlands. The second was a newer group from Goyigama group of the southern lowlands. When the British abolished the system of *rājakāriya* (service to the King) in 1832 and established a judicial and administrative system, they established the office of the *Mudaliyar* chosen from within the existing ranks of indigenous leaders who had collaborated with the British (Gunasinghe 1996b; Jayawardena 2000; Jiggins 1979; Roberts 1997). The *Mudaliyars* were put in charge of the lower bureaucracy in the regions and the titles were mainly distributed among the high-caste *Goyigama* groups in the southern coastal areas (Gunasinghe 1996b; Jayawardena 2000; Roberts 1997). Jayawardena (2000) argues that these 'somebodies' were a colonial creation, and rewarded for their collaboration with land and titles; although "a key segment of the nineteenth century bourgeoisie, [they] lived and behaved like 'feudals'," but were contemptuous of the *nouveau riche* of other castes who they dismissed as 'nobodies' (pp.xxii-xxiii).

The emergence of class in nineteenth century Sri Lanka had a significant impact on how marriage alliances were formed among the emergent Sinhala middle-class in

several critical ways. The most profound was the shifting of the boundary line between those of 'high' and 'low' birth and the emergence of a new non-aristocratic elite group from the coastal regions. The boundary that separated people of 'high' birth from those of 'low' birth was gradually redrawn to include the people who had shed their low status mainly through economic prosperity and subsequently through education (Raghavan 1961; Ryan 1953/2004). This shifting boundary line, I will show, resulted in inter-caste marriages between the traditional high-caste *Goyigama* group and those that had newly transitioned into the ranks of the 'good people' on account of wealth and education. As pointed out in the previous section, inter-caste marriages were already taking place in the early-twentieth century as a consequence of capitalism even in the interior villages of the island. Gunasinghe (1996a), for example, notes how the migration of low-country shopkeepers, school teachers, and carpenters into the interiors of Kandyan villages effected a structural change on the caste system resulting in inter-caste marriages. At the same time, the rise of a new elite from the low-country —the 'somebodies' of the colonial regime—meant an additional distinction being drawn between them and 'ordinary' families especially when marriage alliances were being considered (*cf.* Jayawardena 2000).

The boundary lines separating the 'good' people from those of 'low' birth, however, continued to be fiercely contested in both the public and private domains: the *Goyigama* people claiming superiority on account of tradition and the newer entrants arguing that their place has historically been on the 'right' side of the boundary line before it was distorted for political purposes.[40] It is significant that those who rose to power during this time through capital accumulation and education did not dismiss caste as feudal and old fashioned, especially in matters of marriage. Rather than assert their achieved status over the acquired status of the Kandyan elite and even the newer low-country *Goyigama* elite families, many of these groups challenged the

[40] The colonial administrations of the Portuguese, Dutch, and finally the British motivated by their own agenda to gain control over the island and manipulated by the competing factions of the prevailing Sinhala society is said to have ultimately led to the restructuring of the prevailing caste system (*cf.* Gunasinghe 1996b; Jayawardena 2000; Raghavan 1961; Roberts 1997).

conventional caste hierarchy by referring to a different historical narrative.[41]

Traditional Sinhalese society was characterised by a segmented social formation and class groups emerged divided along ethnic and caste, and also religious lines (Gunasinghe 1996b, c; Jayawardena 2000). Hence, political activity in the nineteenth century Ceylon also centred on caste and class alliances (Jayawardena 2000; Roberts 1997). Caste divisions continued to be visible in the way political power was vested mainly with the *Goyigama* elite and economic power with mainly the *Karāva* and also *Salāgama*, and *Durāva* (Ryan 1953 /2004). Jayawardena (2000) argues that the conflict between the two groups was primarily about the bourgeoisie trying to displace the traditional feudal class from its position of social and political power rather than about caste conflict *per se*. The emergence of class, however, did not completely dismantle the traditional structure of Sinhalese society; neither did the spread of commercialism dislodge pre-capitalist norms and values of the Sinhalese (Jayawardena 2000; Roberts 1997). Indeed, the regime that came into power following independence was not a bourgeoisie-peasant national front with links with the common people (Gunasinghe 1996c). Instead, it comprised a group that brought together various factions of the bourgeoisie who allied themselves both politically and socially with the aristocratic landholding elite in the Kandyan region (ibid).

The Post-independence Period

Ryan (1953/2004), in his study of the changing nature of caste relations in modern Ceylon following the gaining of independence from British rule in 1949, makes three important claims about the intersection of caste with class that are applicable even today and are relevant to my discussion of marriage. Firstly, Ryan observes that the growth of capitalism and urbanization had resulted in relegating caste to the personal

[41] The *Karāve* caste (fisherfolk) of the Southern provinces, for example, insists that their caste origins can be traced back to the *Kshatriyas*—the royal warrior caste of the Indian caste-system. The introduction on their website reads: "The non-mainstream origin story of the Karawe community, their distinctive martial and other traditions, customs, clans, and martial demeanour differentiates the Karave as a distinct Race rather than a Caste. True to their royal ancestry, the Karavas are the only Sri Lankan community to bear ancestral family names that signify royal ancestry, possess an array of ancient flags, and use royal insignia at family ceremonies." (http://www.karava.org/introduction) (accessed 28 May 2012.)

domain of kinship and marriage with more egalitarian relations being emphasized in the public arena.[42] He asserts that "standards of good taste render caste topics taboo in the mixed classes of urban society, however minutely the genealogies will be scrutinized at the time of approaching marriage" (p.21). Jiggins (1979) records the same reticence in public discussions about caste matters in the 1970s. Spencer (1990/1999), commenting on caste relations in the early 1980s, observes that caste was "always present but almost never seen" (p.191). He asserts that while people did not defend or justify caste, they would not deny it when it came to marriage. Secondly, according to Ryan (1953/2004), the rise of capitalism created class divisions within caste groups making caste endogamy in marriage a matter of caste *and* class.[43] He argues that urbanism and economic rationality together had an impact on social mobility, and established disparities between traditional birth statuses and economic prestige and power. Thirdly, Ryan argues that class divisions interacting with caste had resulted in "sharp cleavages" within caste groups and "dwarfed the significance of caste stratification (p.209).[44] He observes that "the fundamental status division of the urban population is into an English educated, shoe and trouser wearing, white collar and professional upper class, and the saronged, barefooted, vernacular-speaking labour class" (p.308).

While hypergamous marriages for upper-caste women had been a norm in the past, from the early 20th century onwards marriage became a principal strategy for social mobility for both men and women within the newly formed bourgeoisie (Jayawardena 2000; Roberts 1997). Both the traditional and newer *Goyigama* elite and the *nouveau*

[42] This is debatable as caste continues to play a role in public life, especially politics (*cf.* Gunasinghe 1996b).

[43] As discussed in the section on caste, status divisions based on power, prestige, and wealth existed within the high-caste *Goyigama* group of the Kandyan kingdom even before the influence of colonisation (Gunasinghe 1996b, 1990/2007; Roberts 1975, 2007). Furthermore, class differentiation is said to have existed within the *Karāve* group and was partly a result of state policies of the pre-colonial order whereby the Kings of both the Kōtte and Sītawaka dynasties of the 15th century bestowed honours on certain families (Gunasinghe 1996b).

[44] Ryan (1953/2004) observes that by the early 1950s there was a significant reduction in caste symbolism and hierarchical arrangements in the southern coastal regions. Economic success of certain southern caste groups together with a strong sense of communal solidarity and their numerical weight in certain areas had "resulted in a breakdown of symbolic evidences of inferiority […] [which was] gradually reflected in a heightened esteem position" (p.264). Ryan notes that while horizontal social distance was maintained mainly through communal solidarity, vertical social distance between these castes was vastly reduced with economic prosperity.

riche strove to consolidate their status through education and property. The new comers, understanding that wealth did not guarantee elite status, rapidly transformed their money into education and also property and succeeded in gentrifying themselves within a generation. The traditional elite understood that they could not rest on their laurels and invested in education and urban property to ensure that the subsequent generations did not lose their grip on power. Both groups also understood the value of strategic marriage alliances for the expansion of social networks. Men who had established themselves in the medical or legal professions or in the civil service were able to attract women with large dowries in the form of money or property, and a number of families used their place in the respected professions and services to consolidate their positions through strategic marriage alliances. Roberts (1997) points out that marriage and dowry were used with "considerable dexterity" to "buttress or assist" families intent on climbing the social ladder (p.223). Professionals with shaky economic foundations but prestigious jobs managed to secure dowries to help them acquire land, and also enabled many doctors, lawyers, and government servants to become substantial property owners (ibid).

By the mid-twentieth century even as new ideologies and values in the form of liberal education, nationalism, concepts of political and economic democracy, and modern secularization were redefining the public and private domains of social relations, caste continued to define notions of marriage, family, and kinship (Ryan 1953 /2004). Furthermore, even as egalitarian principles were gradually transforming the public domain, among the English speaking elite, class differences based on occupational prestige and wealth emerged as the main barrier for egalitarian interaction (ibid). The rise of a class-based society, therefore, did not completely dismantle the traditional structures and challenge traditional values of the Sinhala, but existed within and parallel to the old feudal structures and segmented social formation of the Sinhalese (Gunasinghe 1996b; Jayawardena 2000; Roberts 1975, 1997). The consequences of this particular historical trajectory is that, as I will show, caste *and* class continue to be deliberated, debated, and discussed in marriage to date.

Colombo's Middle-class Today

Economic indicators show that the middle-class in Sri Lanka is rapidly expanding as a consequence of economic growth: per capita GDP (Gross Domestic Product) has increased from $899 in 2000 to $2911 in 2011 (Central Bank of Sri Lanka 2013); Gross National Income (GNI) per capita rose to US$5,511 in 2011 from (World Bank 2012); and the national poverty head count for Sri Lanka declined from 26.1 percent in 1990/91 to 15.2 percent in 2006/07 (Department of Census and Statistics 2009). The expansion of the middle-class is linked to the liberalisation of the economy in 1977, which led to the contraction of the agriculture sector opened up opportunities in the industrial and service sectors mainly in urban areas, and also in the international labour market, leading to large-scale internal and external migration (Jayaweera 2002a,b). The new government that came into power at this time, led by the 'right of centre politician'—J.R. Jayawardena, discarded the socialist welfare oriented policies of its predecessor, and opened up the economy to foreign investment and economic development (Spencer 1990/1999). Structural adjustment policies were introduced through close collaboration with the IMF and the World Bank, whose fiscal and monetary policies were aimed at reducing government expenditure in the social sector and promoting privatisation (Jayaweera 2002b). The entrance of multi-national companies, the setting up of an export-processing zone in close proximity to the capital city, the commencement of a large-scale public investment programme with a focus on generating electricity, and expanding the rural agriculture sector, attest to the tremendous influx of foreign investment that resulted in an unprecedented growth rate in the early years (Kelegama 2006). In addition, the liberalisation initiative was aided by the growth of the tourism industry and also through the migration of mainly unskilled labour to the Gulf (ibid).

Subsequent governments have continued to promote neo-liberal policies that have resulted in the expansion of the private sector, even as it continued to play a central role in health and education, and also in the provision of public utilities. Since the end of the civil war in 2009 the government has made a consolidated effort to direct both public and private sector investments into infrastructure projects particularly to those

parts of the country severely affected by the conflict. However, with Colombo and the Southern areas being the government's priority, development initiatives continue to have a 'centre bias'. In addition, there has been a renewed effort to boost the tourism industry with new tourism zones declared in the West, South, and Eastern coastal areas. Independent economic analysts, however, forecast a slowdown in economic growth unless there are reforms to inefficient state sector enterprises and steps taken to increase business confidence and FDI (foreign direct investment) into the country.[45] The growing burden of public debt has contributed to increasing taxation and rising cost of living.

The city of Colombo, where my fieldwork was based, is the commercial, industrial, and cultural capital of Sri Lanka. Colombo was an important trading post and a military fort during Portuguese and Dutch rule and became the capital during British colonial rule. By the late nineteenth century, Colombo was the centre of 'high society' with its prestigious schools, exclusive clubs, large retail shops, and the headquarters of many social, political, and economic organizations (Jayawardena 2000). Colombo also came to house both skilled and unskilled workers of the state and private sectors and also the petty bourgeoisie (ibid). Today, Colombo is home to 2.3 million people, and the district of Colombo has the lowest percentage of poor households in the country (3.9 percent).[46] Migration into the city is mainly driven by people seeking employment opportunities as well as to access good quality education. The headquarters of all multinational companies and local conglomerates as well as those of the financial and state institutions are all located in Colombo. With the exception of a few, most elite state, private, and international schools are located in the city. Many commute daily from various districts for both employment and education, sometimes travelling approximately 100 km (which takes around 2-3 hours by public transport). Colombo's changing landscape attests to an expanding middle-class whose consumption patterns, tastes, and lifestyles are being shaped by global and regional trends. This is evident in the development of suburban areas, the improved quality of housing, the growth of

[45] Personal communication Amal Sanderatne (Frontier Research) 17 May 2013
[46] Of the total population living in the district of Colombo, 76.7 percent are Sinhalese of whom 70.7 are Buddhists (Department of Census and Statistics 2012).

luxury and semi-luxury high-rise apartments, the number of privately owned vehicles, the demand for international schools, a growing emphasis on leisure activities, and the ubiquitous presence of the retail and service sector whose advertising has overwhelmed the urban landscape.

3.2. Class and Status Concerns amongst the Sinhalese

Maintaining status is part of the everyday life of men and women in Sri Lanka and it has been argued that it is within the upper echelons of Sinhala society, namely the elite and the middle-classes, that people are most concerned with status (Amarasuriya 2010; Obeyesekere 1984/1987; Spencer 1990/1999). Obeyesekere (1984/1987) in fact asserts that the preoccupation with status reaches its zenith amongst the urban educated families (p.505). Contemporary status concerns amongst the Sinhalese are informed by the cultural concept of '*læjja-baya*.' Obeyesekere (1981; 1984/1987) glosses this as 'shame' and 'fear of ridicule,' and points out that the concept encompasses

> a complicated, incredibly large, subtly graded vocabulary of shame and its associated ideas pertaining to honour, status, loss of self-esteem, ridicule, vulnerability to slights, deference behaviour, prestige, and so forth(1981, p.79).

He argues that it is "primarily a social emotion" which "orients the individual to the reaction of others," and, therefore, can "act as a powerful mechanism of social control" (ibid). In Sri Lanka, according to Obeyesekere (1984/1987), the opposite of shame is not honour, but the loss of status and prestige. Spencer (1990/1999) suggests that in the absence of a positive code of honour, the opposite of *læjja* is encapsulated in several terms: *tattvaya*—social position; *nambuva*—prestige and pride in one's position; and *ādambara*—"excessive or unjustified pride" and "a lack of modesty and self-effacement", and it is this concept, according to Spencer, that "comes closest to being an exact antonym to *læjja* (pp.172-173).

De Silva (2005) argues that

> unlike the concept of honour which is egalitarian in nature and may be endlessly contested and defended, status is intrinsically

> hierarchical and cannot be openly contested. For even to contest another's status is to reduce it (p.26).

De Silva (2005) links the Sinhalese preoccupation with status with material prosperity, which she argues is a consequence of a combination of influences: a caste-system without an aristocracy and a warrior group, agrarian values, and Buddhism. She posits that within the *Goyigama* cultivator caste—the highest caste among the Sinhalese—"land holds an enormous resonance to Sinhala identity" (p.26). Land ownership, according to de Silva, signifies the agrarian value of "material prosperity," and is critical to asserting status both within one's caste group and with others. She argues that in the absence of a code of honour, material prosperity signifies "intrinsic human worth," and that such a "highly materialist discourse on status [is] validated by a Buddhist theory of practice (*karma*)" (p.27).[47] De Silva's view on status concerns amongst the Sinhalese is, I believe, rather reductionist. As I will show in chapter six, the urban middle-class' preoccupation with status is marked by an anxiety about material possessions, and strives to locate the origin of status and self-worth elsewhere, namely in ideas about 'good birth,' i.e., caste, kinship and genealogy, and respectability. In fact, although material prosperity and consumption has come to signify the contemporary middle-class, and 'class' is the "framing principle for everyday experience," (Liechty 2003), in Sri Lanka the discourse on class status continues to be underpinned by what is perceived to be 'non-material' in an economic sense, that is caste. The complex interweaving of caste and class is captured best in Stoler's (1995) term 'discursive bricolage'—"whereby an older discourse is 'recovered', modified, 'encased', and 'encrusted' in new forms" (p.61).[48]

Spencer (1990/1999), discussing the impact of social change on the socio-political landscape of rural Sri Lanka in the 1980s, uses the term 'indeterminacy' to describe the

[47] Jani de Silva in asserting that "material success is the effect of virtuous acts performed in previous births" is equating Buddhist views on *karma* with *Pubbekatahetuvāda*—the view that all present happiness and suffering arise from previous karma. Such a deterministic view is explicitly rejected by the Buddha in the *Maha Kammavibhanga Sutta* (*The Great Exposition of Kamma*). There is, in fact, no explanation on how *karma* works anywhere in the *Suttas* (Prabhath Sirisena, personal communication, 28 May 2013).

[48] Stoler uses the term in pointing out the continuities between older forms of racism (as manifested in colonisation) and modern racism, rather than the oft noted 'break' between the two forms.

timbre of social relations of the time. He argues that "the loss of one unifying idiom of social standing—that of landholding and tenancy" and the incursions of the state explains to some degree the emergence of competing claims of status and social position (p.165). Spencer points out how ideas about the 'past' and 'present' and also a Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist rhetoric about 'history' are negotiated in both making sense of, and living in, the present. Jani de Silva (2005), in explaining the socio-political landscape of the second JVP insurgency in the 1980s, makes a similar point.[49] She shows how Sinhala identities that had been shaped by a share-holding system of land tenure and kinship were being reshaped by the modern state and its rule of law as well as through globalisation. De Silva argues that the globalisation of the 1970s, which opened up the Sri Lankan economy, brought with it new forms of gender-identities and subjectivities that clashed with older forms of being with sometimes violent results.

Liechty (2003), writing about the urban middle-class in present-day Nepal, describes them as "those people carving out a new cultural space which they explicitly locate, in language and material practice, *between* their class 'others' above and below" (p.5 *my emphasis*), and "construct[s] itself in *opposition* to its class others" (p.15 *emphasis in original*). He observes that the position of being 'in-between' engenders feelings of anxiety and irresolution. Middle-class anxiety, Liechty argues, is partly due to its "ambiguous relationship to the productive economy […] members of the middle-class are those who must constantly promote and justify their self-worth in the face of competing claims in the market" (p.18). In Nepal, anxieties are also engendered by the perpetual engagement with ideas about 'tradition' and 'modernity', 'developed' and 'undeveloped' through which middle-class identities are forged resulting in a sense of middle-class culture "as practice, production, or performance" (Liechty 2006,

[49] The JVP (*Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna*) is a radical left-wing party that combines Marxist ideology with Sinhala nationalism. It was formed in the late 1960s and comprised mainly the newly educated but unemployed Sinhala youth. Slow economic growth in the 1960s had led to high unemployment resulting in the frustrate aspirations of young people, which eventually led to the JVP insurrection of 1971. The State violently suppressed the JVP's bid to take over power. By the mid-1980s the Government's apparent powerlessness to address an economic crisis characterised by high unemployment and a rising cost-of-living, coupled with the introduction of the 13th amendment to the Constitution that sought to devolve power to the eight provinces as a way of appeasing the Tamil minorities, led to another violent confrontation between the JVP and the government forces that only ended in the early 1990s with the capture and death of their leader.

p.4). Hence defining the middle-class, posits Liechty, is to describe the discursive and material practices of a group through which "the contradictions between what it means to be both modern and Nepali" are negotiated (p.62).

As I will show in chapter seven, a sense of anxiety pervades the discourses and practices of the urban middle-class in Sri Lanka. Feelings of unease are triggered in part by their having to negotiate the various contradictions between how to be 'moral' and 'culturally authentic' while also being 'modern' and 'progressive', and partly by their location *in-between* classes. Drawing from Spencer's evocation of 'indeterminacy' I will argue that much of the anxiety, however, stems from their experience of being 'unmoored' *within* it, and their desire to differentiate and distinguish themselves in an amorphous group characterised by flux.

Thus far I have discussed some of the defining characteristics of the Sinhalese middle-class mostly in general terms. In the following section I will examine in more detail how colonialism and aspects of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism influenced the construction of the 'ideal' Sinhala woman.

4. Nationalism and Gender – Constructing the Ideal Middle-class Woman

4.1. Sinhala-Buddhist Nationalism

Unlike in India, Sri Lanka's independence movement was neither characterised by a mass movement nor protracted political agitation for self-rule (Spencer 1990/1999). The transfer of power from the British colonial Government to local leaders was relatively uneventful (ibid). This did not mean that local resistance to colonial rule was absent. From its inception nationalist politics in Sri Lanka was characterised by narrow communal interests (Ibid). The main impetus for the nationalist movement in Sri Lanka was the religious revival of the late 19th century that took place in the southern lowlands and concentrated in the urban areas (de Silva 2005; Obeyesekere 1984/1987; Spencer 1990/1999). The movement's leaders and support base came from the

emerging bourgeoisie living in Colombo and the western and south-western coastal regions (Jayawardena 2000). The Buddhist revival was critical to inculcating national pride and establishing a Sinhala-Buddhist identity because it evoked an older and more superior Sinhala-Buddhist culture, which was constructed in opposition to the European culture of the island's colonial rulers (de Silva 2005; Seneviratne 1999; Wickramasinghe 2006).[50] Some of the main characteristics of the Buddhist revival movement were: religious disputes between Christians and Buddhist enacted mainly through rival publications and public debate; temperance movements; the construction and renovation of Buddhist places of worship; the introduction of public styles of worship that emphasized collective rituals and symbols; the formation of Buddhist associations like the Buddhist Theosophical Society; and the establishment of Buddhist educational institutions (de Silva 2005; Spencer 1990/1999; Wickramasinghe 2006).

The establishment of Buddhist schools, supported by the theosophists and funded by Buddhist philanthropists from the emergent bourgeoisie, was critical to the promotion of Sinhala-Buddhist culture and the cultivation of a distinct Sinhala-Buddhist identity (Jayawardena 1995, 2000). These schools were instrumental in producing a group of Sri Lankans who agitated for political change throughout Sri Lanka's pre and post-colonial history (ibid). Wickramasinghe (2006) notes that by the early twentieth century the Buddhist revival movement

> was more than a purely religious crusade directed against Christianity. It was a method by which the newly emergent middle-classes could challenge the social values of foreign Christian rulers and British rule as a whole (pp.85-86).

It is both interesting and significant that the Buddhist revival in its organization and the values it promulgated mirrored the protestant missionary enterprise (de Silva 2005; Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988). The term 'Protestant Buddhism' is used to describe this new form of Buddhism that incorporated the ethos of modernity in its formulation and practice, and also in its vision of an ideal Sinhala-Buddhist society (Gombrich and

[50] A Hindu revivalist movement also took place concurrently and sometimes merged with the Buddhist revival (Wickramasinghe 2006). As my thesis focuses on the formation of Sinhala-Buddhist middle-class identities in Sri Lanka, I have omitted a discussion on other ethno-religious movements of this time.

Obeyesekere 1988). Anagarika Dharmapala was one of the central figures of this movement whose vitriolic writings and impassioned speeches denouncing people's slavish imitation of all things 'Western' significantly influenced the middle-classes (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988; Wickramasinghe 2006). Dharmapala's *Gihi Vinaya* (Code for the Laity), circulated widely during this time, detailed two-hundred rules under twenty-two headings, and focused on proper religious observance as well as table manners, toilette habits, and general etiquette (Dharmapala 1968; Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988). Dharmapala's missionary school education and bourgeoisie family background is clearly evident in the way he denounced the 'crude' behaviour of peasants and promoted Western notions of propriety. This was certainly ironic, but not inherently contradictory because Dharmapala's objective was the construction of a modern Sinhala Buddhist identity (Amarasuriya 2010, p.216).

For the middle-classes involved in the Buddhist revival, religious modernisation joined with nationalism became an ideological force that resulted in the merging of religious and ethnic identities (Seneviratne 1999). It was during this time that the idea of an authentic and glorious past wherein the hydraulic civilisation of the Sinhala-Buddhists flourished was circulated (Wickramasinghe 2006). The nationalist movement, hence, came to be seen as a way of reviving that which had been corrupted by various outside influences (Seneviratne 1999). Wickramasinghe (2006) argues that the idea of an authentic cultural identity was already fostered during British colonial rule. As discussed before, the cultural practices of the low-country Sinhalese was seen as composite and acculturated when compared with the authentic culture of Kandyan kingdom that had remained in relative isolation till the nineteenth century (Obeyesekere 1984/1987; Wickramasinghe 2006).[51] For the British, just as the *Brahmin* was the authentic Hindu, the high-caste Kandyan came to represent the authentic Sinhala person (Wickramasinghe 2006, p.55). Wickramasinghe (2006) argues that the nationalist movement drew from several discourses about the past to assert

[51] Obeyesekere argues that "the significance of the [southern lowlands] has often been misconceived, largely owing to a misunderstanding of historical process. Many scholars think the 'true' cultural traditions of Sri Lanka are represented in the Kandyan kingdom, an error arising from the fact that Kandy was the last kingdom to fall to the British in 1815, so that the Sinhala Buddhist civilisation was concentrated there" (Obeyesekere 1984/1987:6).

an authentic cultural identity.

The establishing of a 'Sinhala-Only' language policy by S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike's political party in 1956 is considered a watershed moment in Sri Lanka's post-colonial history. The bourgeoisie-aristocratic alliance that had taken over the country's governance in 1948 was viewed as an elite 'Westernised' group who had little commonality with the masses (Gunasinghe 1996c; Spencer 1990/1999). It was the vernacular educated Sinhala intelligentsia who expressed concern that the language, culture, and religion of the Sinhalese were being endangered due to an indifferent government (ibid). Bandaranaike, who also came from a high-caste bourgeoisie family, exploited these anxieties and promised a government that would address the grievances of the Sinhala people including their language demands.[52] The Sinhala-only language policy in government contributed to the alienation of the Tamil population and eventually led to a protracted and bloody ethnic conflict that lasted over thirty years (Spencer 1990/1999). From this point on, as Spencer (1990/1999) observes, Sri Lankan politics was characterised by successive ruling government wanting to negotiate a settlement to the 'Tamil problem', but being vetoed every time by an opposition calling for the defence of Buddhism and its chosen protectors—the Sinhala people (p.22).

4.2. Nationalism and the Middle-class Woman

Nationalist movements in many parts of the world have been characterised by an intense preoccupation not only with questions about the nation and society, but also with women and family (Abu-Lughod 1998b, c; Chatterjee 1989; Jayawardena 1986/2003, 2000; Mann 1985; Stoler 1995). Chatterjee (1989) describes how Western-educated Indian nationalists in Bengal reacted to their feelings of ambivalence about embracing 'modern' norms by constructing an ideology that separated their world into two distinct domains: the material and the spiritual. The material world—the public domain of men—was defined by science and technology

[52] S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike's wife, who later became the first woman prime minister, was from an elite *Radala* family whose members had played key roles in the colonial regime (Spencer 1990/2000).

and rational and modern forms of economic organization and statecraft. The spiritual sphere—the private domain of women—was the home within which the traditional values of home, family, and religion could be protected and upheld. The material and spiritual mapped onto the dichotomy of the "outer and the inner"—the "home and the world" (p.238). Ensconcing women in the home and imagining women as embodying the true essence of culture, according to Chatterjee, was a form of compensation for social isolation and loss of 'self' men experienced when they were compelled to conform to modern values and norms to gain independence. Chatterjee argues that, while neither the family nor the women within the home could be insulated from the impact of social change, the "degree and manner of [women's] westernisation" had to be different from that of men's to protect "the inner spirituality of indigenous social life" (p.243). Drawing on Sunder-Rajan's term 'sufficient modernity,' De Mel argues (2001) that while women's rights were recognized as part of the impetus for nationalism in South Asia, their emancipation was simultaneously contained through other social controls, which involved a re-invention of tradition (p.7). In the context of Bengal, Donner (2008) argues that the nationalist project in India was essentially a class project; ideas about the "ordered home," "marriage focusing on conjugality and devoted maternities," and the changing relations between the generations as the extended household moved from the authority of older women to husbands, were central to the identity of the emerging middle-class (p.45). Donner notes, however, that although the nationalist movement in Bengal had

> very specific notions of what it meant to be Bengali, an Indian, and middle-class woman in the urban context, all those new identities were not necessarily homogenously amalgamated into coherent notions about women's roles as wives and as mothers (p.42).

Feminist scholars have critiqued narratives that portray women as passive subjects of nationalism by uncovering the ways in which women have contributed to the on-going debates about nationalism and the family in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and shaped the emerging discourses about the role of women (Abu Lughod 1998b; de Mel 2001; de Alwis 1995; Jayawardena 1986/2003). At the same time feminists have also questioned the conventional reading of the impact modernity had

on women's lives—that is their emergence into the public sphere of education, politics, and employment—as radical and new (Abu-Lughod 1998a). They show how modernity wrought complex changes in the lives of women, opening up spaces for more public engagement even as it foreclosed others (Abu Lughod 1998b; Jayawardena 1986/2003; Liddle and Joshi 1989).

The intersection of nationalism, class, and gender in the construction of women's identities in Sri Lanka has been examined mainly by feminist scholars (De Alwis 1995, 1997; de Mel 2001; Jayawardena 1986/2003, 1995, 2000). De Alwis (1995, 1997) reworks Chatterjee's thesis by arguing that it is not 'spirituality' that bourgeoisie women had to embody, but notions of 'respectability'—a concept I will discuss in detail in the next section. According to De Alwis (1995) missionary schools, specifically boarding schools, is where the norms of respectability—their dress, behaviour, and demeanour—were inculcated. Jayewardene (2000) records the social history of the urban middle-class in Sri Lanka by tracing the emergence of a 'colonial bourgeoisie' in the nineteenth century during British colonial rule. She argues that even as Victorian norms and Christian values shaped bourgeoisie women's identities often in restrictive ways, modern values also had an emancipatory impact on their lives. She shows that although many women in the newly emergent middle-class were confined to the home, some others made use of their education to enter public life as professionals and participated in political movements. Some women from the urban elite, Jayawardena records, even defied the conventions of the time by marrying foreigners, initiating divorce, or living abroad. Referring to more recent history where wives and daughters of politicians have entered mainstream politics, De Alwis (1995) further shows how women have manipulated the trope of respectability to gain access into a predominantly male dominated sphere. De Mel (2001), referring to women's responses to the ethnic conflict, records how they operated from within the dominant nationalist discourse that cast women as mothers of the nation and deployed their identities as mothers to engage effectively in politics. The work of these feminist scholars points to the complex and contradictory ways in which middle-class women's identities are, and have been, constructed and enacted in Sri Lanka. As I will show, marriage also produces a particularly rich source through which conflicting notions of

what it means to be a modern Sinhala woman can be examined.

Sinhala-Buddhist Nationalism and Women's Respectability

A discourse on respectability was at the heart of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist ideology of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century and was fundamental to the construction of the ideal Sinhala woman. I take up this discussion because women's identities in Sri Lanka continue to be structured by notions of 'respectability' (Amarasuriya 2010; Hewamanne 2008; Ruwanpura 2011), and, as I will show, maintaining respectability plays a critical role in assessing the 'marriageability' of women. Mosse (1985) argues that the emergence of modern nationalism in Europe in the eighteenth century played a crucial role in shaping notions of respectability within which ideals of masculinity and femininity were constructed. According to Mosse (1985), the term 'respectability' refers to "'decent and correct' manners and morals, as well as the proper attitude towards sexuality" (p.1). The bourgeois woman was "idealised as the guardian of morality" and of the "traditional order" and came to be regarded as a national symbol (Mosse 1985, p.17).[53] In Sri Lanka, the construction of respectability in relation to women's purity, virtue, and morality is not only a consequence of colonialism and its attendants—Victorian norms and Christian values, but is underpinned by the Sinhala concept of '*læjja-baya',* which was discussed in the previous section.

Obeyesekere (1984/1987) observes that while *læjja* or shame is emphasised in regulating women's behaviour, the composite *læjja-baya*—shame and fear of ridicule, exerts greater control over men's activities because of the public roles they play, which make them more vulnerable to people's judgement (p.505). Spencer (1990) argues that Obeyesekere's translation of *læjja* as 'shame' is inadequate because it does not take into account the modesty and restraint in behaviour that the term evokes. Spencer points out that *læjja* also has a "positive valuation as something to be inculcated in all children as a proper ingredient of all good public behaviour" (p.172).

[53] See Stoler (1995) *Race and the Education of Desire* for a discussion on European nationalism, colonialism, and its impact on bourgeoisie women both in Europe and the colonies.

De Alwis (1997) extends the discussion to the gendered practices of restraint amongst the Sinhalese. De Alwis examines how indigenous ideas of propriety and morality were reconstituted within the idioms of Victorian and Christian values. In doing so, she asserts that the term 'respectability' to be a more useful category through which to interrogate how post-colonial female subject positions are produced within the "interconnected regimes of power, such as patriarchy, capitalism, and imperialism" (pp.105-106). De Alwis examines how the colonial Christian missionary enterprise introduced in their schools a set of disciplinary practices like rigid timetables and needlework through which respectability became embodied within the female subject. De Alwis details how a woman's moral appearance was judged through her "'outward appearance', 'demeanour' or 'countenance,' which was frequently embellished with adjectives such as 'decent', 'domestic', 'modest', 'gentle', 'simple', 'submissive', and 'shy'" (p.110). Women's sexuality was disciplined through "the regulation of bodily gestures, movements, [and] dress" (p.110). De Alwis also notes how missionaries, who were often appalled at the lack of public display of affection and companionship in the household, sought to convert marriage and family according Christian principles (pp.126-125).

The ideologies propounded by Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism significantly changed the way in which the ideal Sinhala woman was imagined. Jayawardena (1986) argues that men belonging to the nationalist movement reacted against colonial perceptions of 'natives' by promoting notions of respectability and chastity in women's conduct and also their attire. *The Daily Code for the Laity*, written by the leader of the Buddhist revival— Anagārika Dharmapāla—was instrumental in bringing about dramatic change in women's behaviour during this time (De Mel 2001). Of the pamphlet's two-hundred rules, thirty were directed at women. The rules, drawn from Victorian notions of respectability and propriety, were intended to produce an ideal Sinhala woman (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988). The rules detailed a wife's duties to her husband, specified what denoted modesty in clothing, and provided guidance on how to conduct herself in public places. Modesty in dress was critical to such a production. Wickramasinghe (2006) describes how a national dress was created at this time which symbolised the "transformation of the whole person, the creation of a new human

being" (p.94). She argues that while men's national dress denoted political belonging, women's dress "functioned on a different plane, that of emotion and sensibility" (p.93). As nurturer and symbol of the nation a woman had to be "freed, educated, and transformed into a new woman, but within the framework of tradition" (ibid). Therefore, according to Wickramasinghe, the *osariya*—a style of sari worn by the nobility in the Kandyan kingdom— was chosen for its "authenticity" as well as its modesty and decency.[54]

Virginity and Chastity

The emphasis on modesty and restraint that Spencer (1990) includes in his elucidation of '*læjja-baya*' becomes central to the lives of girls when they reach puberty in Sri Lanka. The ritual of first menstruation marks the transition to womanhood, and the practises associated with the ritual instructs girls in the required behaviour for women (Ryan 1957; Winslow 1980). Post puberty a girl is expected to be circumspect and modest in the company of men, wear more modest clothes, and refrain from being alone in public spaces without the protection of her family (Spencer 1990). The ritual of first menstruation is associated with making public a girl's readiness for marriage; and it is through marriage that a woman reaches adult status (Ryan 1957; Winslow 1980). In order to secure a good marriage, a girl's virginity must be closely guarded. The period between reaching puberty and getting married, therefore, is a critical time for the family who must ensure that their daughter's reputations remains intact and she is seen as virtuous in the eyes of the public for the sake of her future welfare as well as for family honour. Obeyesekere (1984/1987) notes that the emphasis on virginity in brides in South Asia has several social consequences. Protecting a girl from sexual transgression and "guard[ing] her reputation from any rumour of sexual immodesty" results in: severe restrictions on a woman's mobility; protective care for girls; and early marriage in early adulthood (pp.431-432).

[54] The Kandyan *osariya* was introduced by the later *Nayakkar* dynasty of the Kandyan kingdom (who originated from Madurai and Tanjore in South India) and worn mainly by elite women. Therefore, as Wickramasinghe (2006) notes, it is ironic that this style of wearing the sari was eventually promoted by the nationalists as the "true" Sinhala dress (p.93).

The average age of marriage in Sri Lanka, however, rose from 18 to 25 quite rapidly in the post-independent era (Caldwell 1999; Malhotra and Tsui 1996). With increasing numbers of women entering higher education and seeking employment, this has meant that there is a growing body of women in the public domain who do not come under the direct purview of family, and, therefore, must be subject to surveillance by the community. As mentioned before, Obeyesekere (1984/1987) had pointed out that men are more sensitive to the fear of ridicule because of the public roles they play (p.505). However, with women entering public spaces of education and employment they have become equally exposed (Jayaweera 2002a). Women's behaviour and conduct in public, therefore, are subject to public scrutiny; instead of ridicule, however, women are vulnerable to being sexualized and shamed (De Alwis 1997; de Silva 2005; Hewamanne 2003, 2008). De Silva (2005) argues that this was a direct consequence of women's empowerment through education that made them sometimes unwilling to be deferential to men. Women's lack of deference, according to de Silva, was often interpreted as a *lack* of *læjja* –"a display of shamelessness" that at times was interpreted as "sexual laxity" because a "confident posture" connoted "a desire to project the body as an eroticised zone" (p.28). Hewamanne (2008), referring to the exodus of young rural women into urban areas for work in garment factories, argues that women's presence in the public arena away from the protection of their families incites anxiety in society in general and men in particular. Such anxieties compel people to resort to a sexualised form of shaming as a particular method of gendered surveillance. According to de Silva (2005) unmarried women's independence in public was somehow seen as diminishing men's status—something that could not be tolerated.

The focus on women's virtue through the surveillance of her sexuality raises the question of virginity and chastity and its importance to Sinhala marriage. Although contemporary discussions about women's sexuality highlight the importance of remaining a virgin until marriage (*cf.* Hewamanne 2008; Silva et al 1998 as summarised in Ruwanpura 2010), the historicity of virginity in Sinhala culture remains vague. Unlike in the sub-continental literature, traditional Sinhala marriage is characterised as unique because of its lack of emphasis on chastity and fidelity in both men and

women. Obeyesekere (1984/1987) asserts that virginity and chastity in women are not part of Buddhist ethics or doctrine; hence when Buddhism supplanted Brahmanic values in Sri Lanka, it transformed marriage into a secular institution. According to Obeyesekere, these values continue to be part of the secular ideology; however, because they do not have religious sanction, there is variability in how it is practically applied in the practices of the Sinhala people. In practice, argues Obeyesekere, these values are "more the concern of high-status groups than of peasant, though they remain ideals for all" (pp.444-445).

5. Conclusion

Yanagisako and Collier (1987), who were pivotal in the revival of kinship studies within feminist anthropologists, had asserted that an analysis of family within the web of social change must look at how it reproduces and reconfigures not only gender inequality, but also forms of class inequality. Some of the South Asian scholarship on marriage point to how class is part of the wider discourses about what it means to be modern, and how women's identities are continuously constructed and experienced through the trope of class (*cf.* Donner 2008; Liechty 2003; Osella and Osella 2000b; Sharma 1986). The discussion illustrates how class is reproduced through women's engagement with education, employment, consumption, and lifestyles (*cf.* Donner 2008; Sharma 1986), and is also shaped by their ideals and desires about wifehood and motherhood (*cf.* Donner 2008; Osella and Osella 2000a). Class is also most saliently displayed at the point of marriage through lavish weddings and the setting up of a new household (*cf.* Osella and Osella 2000a).

The objective of this chapter was to provide the context for my discussion of marriage in general and caste and class in particular that I take up in chapter seven where I delineate how the family, and specifically women, are implicated in the reproduction of difference. As I discussed, class played a significant role in the creation of the ideal Sinhala woman and in shaping notions about women's morality. I will show how class continues to be central to the everyday experiences of women's lives in Sri Lanka. The

family, I will argue, is the fundamental institution through which gender ideologies and class values are channelled through to the next generation and plays a critical role in structuring women's choices about marriage.

4 – From 'Arranged' to 'Choice'

Changing Marriage Practices in Contemporary Sri Lanka

1 A family history

1990-2010 – Nāmali and Sampath's marriage is what is conventionally called a 'love-marriage.' It was preceded by a romantic relationship, or a 'friendship' (*yāluvelā*) that blossomed between them after they met at an A-level tuition class. They were both 19 when they met and it was their first romantic relationship. They were 28 when they eventually got married because Sampath, as the only son, had to wait for his two sisters to marry first as is the Sinhala custom. Nāmali's family was at first hesitant to approve of the relationship as Sampath came from a lower-caste, but eventually deferred to their daughter partly because it was her 'choice' or 'what she wanted' (*kæmætta)*, and partly because she had presented a very good case about Sampath's eligibility: he was educated and, compared to her lower-middle-class family, Sampath came from a wealthy and well-connected family belonging to Colombo's 'old' business community. Before getting their parents' approval Nāmali recalled how they *"hung out in a clique of ten boys and ten girls […] and went for parties at each other's houses."* Nāmali did not remember any explicit declaration of love between them:

> *Nothing was asked [...]But we used to start talking at 10.30 in the night and we keep the phone around 4.30 or 5.30 in the morning (laughs) [...] Then there was a Hindi film that [was showing] so I said "there is a nice film shall we go and see?" My cousin-sister came with me as well. We were just friends. Outside we were friends but internally I was feeling something towards him. [At the film] he kissed me [...] So then we knew.*

Nāmali described her wedding as a "glamour event" which was held at one of Colombo's five-star hotels. Although her parents "gave the money" for the wedding as is the Sinhala custom, Nāmali rarely sought her mother's advice during the preparations because "she thinks in a totally different way, her thinking and my thinking patterns are totally different [...]We did the whole wedding and the home-coming [ceremony]; both of us did the way we wanted." After marriage, while

Nāmali's mother "wanted [her] to go and live separately and not to live with the mother-in-law," Sampath had assured her "that his mother is very liberal and not like any other mother-in-law." Hence, Nāmali and Sampath moved to a small flat in Sampath's home because it was his "duty" as the only son to live in his ancestral house. Nāmali described her married life as "comfortable" because her mother-in-law handled the running of the household with the help of numerous domestic aides. "I don't do any house work," Nāmali confessed. "All [my mother-in-law] wants us to [do is] study and build our career." In fact, on account of Nāmali being a middle-level manager at a prestigious conglomerate, she would often "work late [and] come home only in time for dinner, sometimes even later." Nāmali described her mother as an "obedient wife [...] she never argued with my father. She would agree with whatever my father said." In contrast, Nāmali asserted that she was "different—I argue all the time."

1950 -1970 —Nāmali's mother Gunavatī's marriage was arranged. When she was 16, her parents had moved to Colombo on account of her father's work transfer. Once Gunavatī completed her A-levels she joined the clerical cadre of a private company. After a few years, her parents decided to look for a groom from the city rather than from their kin-networks in the village. Her parents had "placed an advertisement in [a Sinhala weekly and] selected two candidates" from the applicants who had responded. The first person to "come and see her" was a navy officer whom "she did not like." The other was her husband who had already visited "about seventy women" before he "liked" Gunavatī. Gunavatī's father—a police officer—made use of his networks to meticulously check the details of her future husband's family background even before he was asked to visit. It is part of their family lore how he personally visited the workplace and neighbourhood of the groom's home to confirm that the details he had provided in the application letter were, in fact, true. After that Gunavatī's parents encouraged her to consider the marriage despite the age difference between them—she was 24 and he was 33. They advised her on how "rather than marrying someone younger, to marry someone with more understanding (*tērena kenek*) was better." He was also working for a prestigious private company and owned a partially built house in the suburbs. Gunavatī conceded because "unlike now, I lacked understanding then

[...] So the decision was made [...] and I also made up my mind." After the families had officially visited each other, their marriage was legally registered. Although they could not live together before the wedding ceremony, Gunavatī's husband was allowed to visit her at home. "Because [her] husband had a small car" he was allowed to take her out for a film and even for "a walk on Galle Face Green"; he would also "sometimes pick [her] up from the bus-stop after work and drop [her] home." Gunavatī described her wedding, which was held at a modest reception hall in Colombo, as "very simple" compared to her daughter's "grand" one. Gunavatī remembers "discussing everything with her family" during the preparations. Her mother organized the wedding with "the help of our neighbours who lived in the police flats with us." Compared to her life before, which Gunavatī characterised as "carefree (*sæhællu*)," she described her first years of marriage as "heavy (*barai*)" with duties and responsibilities on account of having to look after her ageing and "difficult" mother-in-law as well as having to cope with an asthmatic baby while she continued to work for economic reasons.

1920-1940 — Mænikē, Nāmali's maternal grandmother, had married a relative. Although Mænikē had been taken out of school when she reached puberty, she did not get married until she was 24 because she was the youngest of 11 children and had to wait until her older sisters were married. Mænikē's marriage "happened [because] we knew them, they were our relatives [and] his family regularly visited our home." Mænikē's grand-daughters—Nāmali and Subhashini—mentioned that even though their grandmother "didn't like to talk about it much," their grandfather had intimated that it was not a formally arranged marriage, but was based on an "attachment" (*sambandhayak*) that had developed from childhood. Moreover, compared to Mænikē's family who enjoyed a high status in the village on account of her grandfather being a native doctor who "had wealth [and also] a lot of paddy fields," their grandfather's family had been "rather poor." He was a regular visitor to their grandmother's home because he would "drop in for meals when he was hungry while running errands for his mother." Despite the socio-economic differences between the two families, Namali's grandfather had eventually improved his status by joining the police force once he completed the eighth grade. Mænikē compared her "simple wedding ceremony [...] with 10-15 relatives" to the elaborate rituals and sumptuous

marriage feast that had characterised her oldest sister's marriage celebration. Because Mænikē and her husband "knew each other [they] didn't even exchange rings." Mænikē remembers going by buggy-cart to the nearest town to get registered a few months before the marriage ceremony because "that was what happened in those days." After the wedding, Mænikē lived in her husband's home for a few months before moving to the government quarters he had been allocated on account of his job in the police force. Mænikē remembers getting used to managing her own household, but "never feeling alone (*tanikamak hitunē næ*)" because she lived surrounded by the families of her husband's colleagues.

.....

2 Introduction

Nāmali's family history captures some of the changes in marriage practices and norms that have taken place within the span of three generations from the early decades of the twentieth century to the first decade of the twenty-first amongst the Sinhala-Buddhist urban middle-class in Sri Lanka. Sentiment, rather than social obligation to kin, was becoming central to marriage with the conjugal relationship being defined in terms of emotional intimacy and affective bonds. At the same time achieving social mobility and class concerns were overtaking the importance of maintaining caste endogamy to marriage, and traditional family hierarchies were giving way to the idea of marriage as a partnership. Overall, individual agency, expressed in terms of 'choosing', doing 'what we want', and 'being different', had become the principal trope through which stories about getting married were narrated.

As discussed in chapter one, changing notions of marriage and family across the globe, that is, from obligation to kin, social reproduction, and complementary labour to an ideal of marriage based on affective bonds, emotional intimacy, and pleasure, is widely read as indicating the shift from 'tradition' to 'modernity'. The companionate marriage ideal is thus linked to the development of the modern individual self. Indeed, as I will demonstrate in this and the next chapter, individual agency was central to the younger generations' narratives about marriage with choosing one's marriage partner

being integral to the presentation of the self as modern and progressive. However, Nāmali's family history, as well as the other histories I present in this chapter, also challenge the tendency to produce generalised accounts of a stable and monolithic past in contrast to a more complex and capricious present.

Nāmali's family history cannot be neatly categorised into 'tradition' and 'modernity' nor even 'past' and 'present.' For instance, Nāmali highlights the development of internal feelings as a critical marker of a special bond between Sampath and herself, which contrasts with the more formal representations of the marital relationship that Gunavatī and Mænikē presented to me. Yet Mænikē's marriage history suggests that an affective bond had developed between herself and her husband, and was, perhaps, the impetus for their marriage. What is more, it seems that Gunavatī's husband was acting on ideas of intimacy and romance when he sought to spend time with Gunavatī alone before their wedding. It is also significant that, notwithstanding the centrality of the conjugal relationship, kinship obligations continued to shape young people's married life as evidenced by Sampath's prioritising his duties and responsibilities as an only son and brother.

Furthermore, changes in courtship practices and residence patterns do not follow an orderly trajectory between 'then' and 'now'. Whereas Mænikē formed a nuclear household, her grand-daughter is compelled to live in a joint household on account of her husband's familial responsibilities. Just as courtship was restricted in the past and had to be concealed from parents unless a marriage had been formally agreed to, Nāmali and Sampath conducted their courtship through secret phone calls and could meet publicly only in a group setting. It is Nāmali's emphasis of 'individual choice' in selecting a husband that contrasts starkly with her grandmother's and mother's narratives that foreground deference to parents and kin. It is the stress on 'choice' rather than 'love' that characterises young people's narratives about marriage, which I will discuss in detail in the next chapter. What is critical to note here is that the distinction between 'then' and 'now' is blurred—all three narratives indicate the presence of 'choice' in decision making, illustrating how marriages have always been contracted through a process of negotiation between the individual and the collective,

that is the family.

The discussion on 'self-choice' marriages is one that I take up in chapter five. In this chapter I provide a historical overview of traditional Sinhala marriage practices as recorded in historical documents and anthropological writings from the seventeenth to the mid-twentieth century. Drawing from the life-histories I collected, I then present an overview of the changing marriage practices of the twentieth century, highlighting the ways the shift to a more commercialised market-based economy and urbanisation has changed marriage norms and kinship relations. Finally I provide a brief overview of the customs and rituals associated with Sinhala-Buddhist marriage, paying special attention to the way the principal features of the marriage ritual have changed in response to modernity. Even though many of the stories I collected about the oldest generation—those who married in the 1930s and 1940s—were second-hand accounts related by children or grandchildren, they were nevertheless rich with detail. Listening to them I realised that 'how people got married' was an important question young people posed to their parents and grandparents, perhaps as a way of making sense of a past in which intimate relationships seemed dramatically different from those in the present.

3 Sinhala Marriage – Then and Now

3.1 An Historical Overview of Sinhala Marriage

A flexible and easily dissoluble marriage bond, egalitarian gender relations, and permissive sexual mores are the principal features of Sinhala marriage that are often highlighted in the historical records.[55] Writing about the social organization in a Sinhala peasant village in the Kandyan highlands Knox (1621) recorded the following marriage practices: the prevalence of trial marriages where men and women 'married' four or five times before formalizing the marriage bond (p.267); the custom of husbands permitting their wives and daughters to 'lie' with intimate friends and

[55] It must be noted here that a majority of the historical records on Sinhala marriage focuses on what is known as Kandyan-Sinhala customs. Because foreign influences in the Kandyan provinces remained minimal due to its geographical location and political history, the practices of the Kandyan Sinhalese were often studied due to their 'authenticity' (*cf.* Wickramasinghe 2006).

noblemen who visited and lodged in their homes (p.264); the number of opportunities women had and used to pursue amorous activities (p.263); and the freedom women from the higher ranks had to converse with other men without restriction (pp.197-198).[56] Davy (1821), writing about Sinhala marriage in the early part of the nineteenth century, echoes Knox when he notes that:

> Chastity is not a virtue held in very high estimation amongst the Singalese women, nor jealousy a very troublesome passion amongst the men. Infidelity [...] is easily forgiven, unless the lady disgraces herself by forming a low-caste attachment.[57]

Peiris (1956), analysing Sinhalese social organization in the Kandyan period (early-fifteenth to early-nineteenth century) mainly through the study of legal records from that time, draws a similar conclusion about the marriage practices of ordinary people. He notes that "sexual relations in general, and marital relations in particular, were not fetishized, but were considered rather as casual and inevitable incidents in a person's life" (p.197). Such a flexible approach to marriage continued in villages until the mid-twentieth century as observed and documented by Leach (1961), Obeyesekere (1967), Ryan (1958), and Yalman (1967) in their ethnographic monographs. Kandyan inheritance laws give some credence to these claims. For example, the properties of the wife and husband were maintained separately and could be inherited by separate heirs (Goonesekere 1990; Obeyesekere 1967; Yalman 1967). In fact, neither the idea of a 'joint heir' nor a distinction between 'legitimate' and 'illegitimate' children existed in the law; both men and women could pass on their property, regardless of the type of union, to any or all of their children (Goonesekere 1990; Yalman 1967). Although not widely practised, polyandry and sometimes polygyny were acceptable forms of family relationships recognised by indigenous law (Goonesekere 1990; Yalman 1963). The laws of inheritance and land tenure indicate that family relations amongst the

[56] Robert Knox served in the British East India Company as a sea captain. During one of his voyages Knox and some of his colleagues were captured by the Kandyan King and forbidden to leave the island for more than a decade before he finally escaped and arrived in England in 1680. *An historical relation of the island Ceylon* is based on Knox's experiences and observations living the highland villages of the kingdom (Knox 1681/1989).

[57] John Davy was a doctor attached to the British Army's Medical Department in the early nineteenth century and later became the Inspector General of Hospitals. *An account of the interior* of *Ceylon, and of its inhabitants: with travels in that island* records Davy's observations of Ceylon during one of his official visits.

Sinhalese were not characterised by the joint-family system common in the Indian sub-continent (Goonesekere 1990; Obeyesekere 1967). While obligations of assistance and support to parents and kin were recognized, the relationship between a man and a woman, their other sexual partners, and their children were the main focus (ibid).

It is generally accepted that historically the Sinhalese seemed to have attached relatively little moral value to an eternal monogamous union between husband and wife (Ryan 1953/2004, p.313) as evidenced by Kandyan inheritance laws and the prevalence of divorce based on incompatibility initiated by both men and women (Goonesekere 1990; Peiris 1956). The elaborate and public marriage rituals of the high-ranking groups in contrast to the more simple and casual practices of the common people indicate, however, that a family's status in the social hierarchy affected the degree of flexibility a person could exercise in marriage (Leach 1961; Obeyesekere 1984/1987; Peiris 1956; Yalman 1967).

At the same time, the Sinhalese kinship system and customary law regarded the family as the principal unit of society (Peiris 1956). Marriage was the expected norm and unmarried women and men were uncommon (Knox 1621; Davy 1821; Peiris 1956). Ryan (1958) notes that from infancy girls and boys were socialised into the role of husband and wife (p.59). Most men married between the ages of 18-20 (Peiris 1956, p.197) and women usually married at a younger age, typically a few years after puberty (Winslow 1980). According to Ryan (1958), by the first half of the twentieth century, the ideal age to marry had risen to 20 for women and 25 for men (p.65).

It was considered the duty of parents to arrange a marriage for their children by finding a spouse from the same caste and rank as their own with the father usually taking the lead in these arrangements (Knox 1681/1989; Davy 1821). Caste endogamy in marriage was strictly maintained for both men and women and was a matter of family honour (Davy 1821; Harris 2001; Knox 1681/1989; Leach 1961; Peiris 1956), although some lapses were apparently tolerated (Davy 1821; Yalman 1967). As Peiris (1956) and Yalman (1967) note, the casual approach to marriage along with the centrality of marriage to family, kinship, and social structure presents an interesting

historical conundrum; unravelling this, however, is not the focus of my thesis.

Another defining feature of Sinhala marriage is that it was not tied to the religious institution of Buddhism. Marriage is not a religious sacrament in Buddhism—historically it was elderly kin and not Buddhist clergy that officiated over a marriage. As a result, the institutions of marriage and religion existed as separate domains (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988; Ryan 1953/2004; Seneviratne 1999). In addition, Sinhala marriage customs of the past are characterised by a lack of uniformity with a diversity of practices existing even within a single village (Tambiah 1965; Yalman 1967).[58] The range of practices within and between villages is mostly explained as resulting from people's socio-economic status and the desire of some groups to improve or consolidate their social position through strategic marriage alliances (Davy 1821; Gunasinghe 1996; Leach 1961; Peiris 1956; Tambiah 1967; Yalman 1967).

Types of Sinhala Marriage

According to the evidence from the village-based ethnographies of the 1950s and 1960s, Sinhala marriage practices can be broadly categorised into three groups: common-law marriage; cross-cousin marriage; and strategic marriage alliances. Within each of these categories two forms of marriages are distinguished in Sinhalese law and social practice: the terms *dīga* and *binna* referr to the type of residence patterns and inheritance laws adhered to following marriage. *Dīga* marriages were more widely practised and refer to the bride leaving her natal home to reside with her husband's family. *Binna* marriages were matrilocal. If both people were from the same village, these classifications did not have any practical significance; it only mattered if they were from different communities because it impacted on the relative status of the husband and wife (Leach 1961). Although under Kandyan law women and men both owned land, it was men who managed the land. A *binna* husband, therefore, was

[58] The Kandyan Law Commission appointed in 1927 to codify Kandyan law found it difficult to come up with a legal definition of marriage. For people of lower rank who could not afford costly ceremonies "the conducting of a daughter by a man of equal caste with the consent of her relations *constituted* a marriage" (Yalman 1967, p.160 emphasis in original). The commissions eventually thought it too complicated to codify the various marriage practices and decided that legal registration would be the only definition of marriage that would be upheld in a court of law (ibid).

usually a poorer man, and a woman was married in *binna* when there were no sons to inherit property. Obeyesekere (1967), therefore, makes the point that *dīga* and *binna* primarily refer to the mode of inheritance rather than residence patterns *per se*. Leach (1961) describes *binna* marriages as "those of underprivileged males or over-privileged females" (p.85). Not surprisingly a man preferred to live off his own land than be a mere a manager of his wife's property, and a husband married in *binna* was often the subject of a certain amount of ridicule due to his low status (Leach 1961; Peiris 1956; Yalman 1967.

Regardless of the type of marriage, parents and kin played a central role in arranging marriage (Ryan 1958; Yalman 1967). Ryan (1958) notes that 80 percent of the marriages in his study village were arranged through family, while the others were based on the "personal choice" of the couple, but in most cases with parental approval (pp.72-73). He argues that "power of the arranged marriage system" came from "an exaggerated fear of insecurity"—a fear of being isolated in psychological, social, and economic terms. Ryan posits that few people could imagine themselves as "solitary individuals or heads of solitary households cut loose from familial moorings and dependent upon their own initiative to meet all situations of life" (p.73).

Common-law Marriage

Common-law marriage was widely practised by the poorer groups in the community. Marriage was a casual event contracted after obtaining permission from the woman's parents but with little ceremony or formality. A marriage between a man and a woman was publicly acknowledged when they began to live together and share food (Davy 1821; Gunasinghe 1996a; Leach 1961; Yalman 1967).[59] Neither the absence of elaborate custom of common-law marriages nor the practice of trial marriages affected the inheritance rights of children (Leach 1961; Peiris 1956). In Kandyan Law the legality of the marriage was established if a man and woman of the same rank

[59] Leach (1961) notes that men and women were never seen eating together in public. However, "the sharing of food is taken as a symbolic of sexual intercourse which is barely distinguished from marriage itself" (pp.89-90). In fact, men were allowed to have sexual relations with low-caste women without the risk of pollution provided that he did not eat and drink from her (Knox 1681, p.264).

lived together as man and wife and this was considered sufficient for a child to inherit property (Peiris 1956, p.200). Furthermore, illegitimacy was used to refer to children born to a union of unequal castes rather than the absence of a formal marriage (Leach 1961, p.91; Yalman 1967, p.60).

Cross-cousin Marriage

Traditional Kandyan Sinhala marriage is categorised as falling within the Dravidian model of kinship within which formal cross-cousin marriage was practised (Tambiah 1965; Yalman 1967).[60] A male cross-cousin, or *ävässa massinā,* refers either to one's mother's brother's son or to one's father's sister's son. Marriage within the kinship group was common and desired due to the strict rules of endogamy as well as the needs of an agrarian way of life that demanded close cooperation among affines (Peiris 1956; Yalman 1967). Marriage with a cross-cousin was linked to consolidating family solidarity and conserving family assets (Leach 1961). That cross-cousin marriage was the desired union, even theoretically, is signified in the ritual in which the *ävässa massinā* is acknowledged as the principal claimant in the marriage ceremony (Peiris 1956; Yalman 1963, 1967).[61]

Tambiah (1965) argues that while Sinhalese kinship terminology is an expression of the more general Dravidian type, in reality these terms did not have a fixed or unambiguous meaning as evidenced by the variety of marriage practices even within a single village. Yalman (1967) points out that while formal cross-cousin marriage was not always practised, "all marriages were treated *as if* they had taken place between cross-cousins" (p.151 *emphasis in original*). The distinguishing feature of the Sinhalese classificatory kinship system is that terms applied to lineal relatives are extended to collateral relatives as well where kinsmen acquired through marriage are transferred

[60] See footnote on Dravidian kinship in chapter three.
[61] According to Peiris he is paid a 'fee' of forty betel leaves as the groom's procession enters the bride's residence. His acceptance of it signifies that he voluntarily resigns his claim (p.198). Yalman records a ritual of asking the forgiveness of the cross-cousin (*ävässa massinägen samava illima)*, which involves the payment of a hundred betel leaves (*kadulu bulat*) as the bride leaves her home with the groom's party (pp.164-165).

into the idiom of descent (Peiris 1956; Yalman 1967).[62] The debate about the facts and fiction of Kandyan kinship is, however, beyond the purview of this thesis. What is important to note here is that some unions were considered cross-cousin marriages and took place without a formal wedding ceremony because such marriages were reaffirming existing kinship bonds that did not require ritual permission or public acknowledgement (Peiris 1956; Yalman 1963).

Strategic Marriage Alliances

Some historical records and ethnographic evidence a third type of marriage comprising elaborate marriage rituals and customs practised by certain higher ranking groups in society when marrying 'outsiders', that is, a person not belonging to a family's immediate kin networks. . These usually included: a formal matchmaker; mutual visits by the two families; the comparison of horoscopes; the exchange of gifts; several formal ceremonies hosted by both the bride's and groom's families during which a sumptuous wedding feast would be served to their kin groups; and sometimes the bestowal of dowry on the bride by her parents (Davy 1821; Peiris 1956; Subasinghe 1907). The village-based ethnographies of the mid- twentieth century also record this type of marriage as practised by those in the upper-strata of village society (Leach 1961; Peiris 1956; Yalman 1967). Leach (1961) observes that these ceremonial marriages signalled the success of certain "prosperous families […] pursuing a policy of expansion" through the acquisition of new kinsmen, where the public wedding was "a public proclamation of achieved status" (p.92). According to Yalman (1963) "weddings [were] celebrated when a new alliance [was] finalised between distant or new kinsmen" (p.28). Both Leach and Yalman note that such marriage practices were always linked to the assertion of status and the consolidation of social position. Yalman (1967) further notes that families had three main considerations when selecting a marriage partner: the status, rank, and social position of the family within the caste; land and wealth; and the character and physical attractiveness of the young man and woman (p.162).

[62] Yalman argues that that despite variations in marriage practices there is an underlying logic that makes marriage patterns in Sri Lanka similar to the classic Dravidian structure. Yalman's theories have been subsequently critiqued by both Tambiah (1965) and Gunasinghe (1996a) who both argue that Yalman mixes different levels of analysis and confuses theory with practice by assuming that kinship terminology corresponds to actual behaviour .

Yalman (1967) goes on to emphasise the diversity of marriage practices within a single village. He argues that a family's social standing and their place in the social hierarchy determined the kind of marriage practices they adopted and whether marriage was given ritualistic significance. He puts forward a theory that people with higher social standing did not have to re-assert their already established position in the village hierarchy, and, therefore, did not follow elaborate marriage rituals. In contrast, it is the people in the middle ranks seeking to consolidate their position who engaged in elaborate wedding practices, specifically the public wedding ceremony. Yalman notes the conspicuous show of wealth at weddings: the guests wear their best clothes and the women display all their gold jewellery; a sumptuous feast is prepared for the guests; and the wedding revelry includes drinking and some gambling. The poor, like the rich, Yalman argues, were unconcerned about asserting status and, therefore, marriage for them was a casual event. Gunasinghe (1996a) disagrees with Yalman's theory about marriage practices and social position and instead argues it was the wealthier upper echelons of society that need to assert their position in order to maintain their dominance. Obeyesekere (1984/1987), referring to status concerns of the Sinhalese in general, points out that preoccupation with status was directly proportional to the social position of the family. Hence, for the purpose of this discussion, it can be established that when it comes to marriage, both the middle and upper-classes are concerned with maintaining status and prestige.

3.2 Sinhala-Buddhist Marriage in the Twentieth century

The political, economic, and socio-cultural transformation that was taking place as a consequence of capitalism from the mid-nineteenth century onwards discussed in chapter two had a significant impact on the marriage practices of the Sinhalese, especially amongst those living in rapidly urbanising areas. Sinhala marriage continued to be characterised by plurality in the early part of the twentieth century. Within the emerging middle-classes of Colombo some families continued to follow the older customs while others were modifying the old and adapting to the new. Cross-cousin marriage continued to take place mainly amongst elite Kandyan families interested in

maintaining prestige through an 'untainted' lineage. With legal registration being widely practised, common-law marriage was not a feature of middle-class marriage.[63] The most significant changes that were taking place at this time, I would argue, were in direct response to the exigencies of urban life. Social mobility became a central concern of middle-class marriage resulting in an increased number of formal arranged marriages to 'outsiders'. The publication of matrimonial classifieds in English and vernacular newspapers and magazines emerged in the 1940s and rapidly gained popularity especially amongst the petty bourgeoisie. It is at the same time that 'love' marriages also become a part of the repertoire of urban middle-class marriage, which I will analyse in detail in the following chapter.

As mentioned previously, Buddhism played no part in early Sinhala marriage practices and wedding rituals. The Buddhist revival and the emergence of what Gombrich and Obeyesekere (1988) term 'Protestant Buddhism' in the latter half of the nineteenth century resulted in the transformation of Sinhala marriage. The influence of the Buddhist revival was instrumental in re-casting Sinhala marriage within a Protestant structure and, as discussed in the previous chapter, for legitimising Victorian bourgeoisie ideals of morality by re-presenting them within a Buddhist ethical framework (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988). The invocations of a glorious Sinhala-Buddhist past influenced the way the *Pōruva* ceremony was imagined. The ceremony, although optional in the past and practiced mainly by high-status families, became integral to middle-class weddings. Gombrich and Obeyesekere (1988) note how the *pōruva'*s early symbolism of fertility was replaced with royal symbolism: the dais is decorated to resemble a throne; the couple dress in clothes and jewellery associated with the nobility of the Kandyan kingdom; and festival drumming and dancing reinforce the royal imagery. The most significant change has been the introduction of 'Buddhist *sacralia'* to solemnize Sinhalese marriage.[64] Many of the rituals and rites of contemporary wedding, which I describe in section 4.3, have their origins in the Buddhist revival and attest to the way in which a secular ritual was transformed into a religious sacrament.

[63] Refer section on 'legal registration'
[64] See Gombrich and Obeyesekere (1988) for a rich discussion on these rituals.

Arranged Marriage

By the early part of the 20th century marriage between close kin was becoming less desirable among upwardly mobile middle-income families intent on forging new alliances as is illustrated by the three case-studies I present below. An arranged marriage was usually initiated by providing the prospective bride or groom's details to an official matchmaker (*magul kapuva*) whose business it was to know of all the young men and women of marriageable age in a designated area comprising several villages and townships, or to eminent relatives who would use their networks to make discreet inquiries on behalf of their kin.[65]

Amara

The general trend towards marrying outsiders is captured in a statement made by Amara (83) who had got married in the early 1940s: "*there was nothing to be gained from making relatives out of existing kin; the objective was to expand the family"* (*næyo ekka nædækam hadala vædak næ; pavula loku karaganna tamai bæluvē*). Amara came from a family with some property in an interior village in the Kandyan highlands and her mother had been married to two brothers in a polyandrous marriage. Here, she was explaining to me why her mother had refused to marry her daughters to their kinsmen. Her statement implies that a strategic alliance with outsiders was more useful in expanding their family's kinship networks. Amara's daughter—Amali, told me that on account of Amara being considered *"beautiful*" due to her *"fair skin, voluptuous figure, and 'auspicious' face"* (*sudu, mahata, vāsanavanta muhuna*), she had managed to attract the attention of her husband's family when she attended a ceremony in the main temple in that area. Her husband's family lived in a neighbouring village, which had become a thriving township because it was situated on the Kandy-Colombo road. The two families belonged to the same caste but Amara's husband's family occupied a considerably higher status on account of property, education, and also her husband's father's job in the Ceylon Government Railways.

[65] I will be providing a more detailed description how marriages were formally arranged in the section on marriage customs and rituals.

Seetha

Roshini's maternal family was from the Southern province. Her maternal grandparents' marriage in the mid 1930s is another example of the increasing desirability of contracting new alliances and expanding one's kin group. Roshini's grandmother—Seetha—came from the *"wealthiest family in that village*." The great-grandfather had amassed his wealth investing in the colonial graphite mining industry. The palatial two-storey house he built, I was told by Roshini's mother and aunts, was known as the '*raja gedera'* (royal house), and remains part of village lore even today. Although wealthy, his three daughters had stopped attending school soon after they attained puberty—a common practice among many Sinhala families at that time. Roshini told me that her grandmother Seetha had been around sixteen when a marriage proposal had been brought from a family of the same caste living in a coastal township nearby.

> *My grandfather was a school principal and spoke six languages […] But the age difference was so big […] 18 years […] that my grandmother had told her mother 'why don't you marry him!' […] that's a little bit of my grandmother's feistiness coming out that early!*

The union between the two was considered "*an excellent match*" because "*she came with a lot of money and a lot of energy, but not with the education*." Roshini's grandfather's late marriage was a result of his having to provide for his younger sisters' marriages before he could settle down. Education and a government job had already become important markers of status amongst the middle-class, and a number of families that had benefitted from colonial industries sought to gentrify their wealth through education, and marriage was one strategy in achieving this (Jayawardena 2000).

Pearl

Grace (71) came from the Southern coastal town of Matara and talked about her mother Pearl's marriage in 1938 as having been arranged by her older brothers who had migrated to Colombo for work. Grace explained how her uncles had "*brought home* a *friend from work [...] because they probably wanted her to live in Colombo where they could keep an eye on her.*" A conventional marriage with a kinsman would

not necessarily have achieved such an objective. What is also interesting is that although they were from the same caste, Pearl was a Roman Catholic while her husband was a Buddhist. Although her husband had asked Pearl to change her Christian first-name to a Sinhala one before he introduced her to his parents, Grace and her older brother remember their mother continuing to attend Sunday mass and celebrating Christmas. Moreover, even though the children were all Buddhists, they were all given Christian first names.

Marriage Classifieds [66]

The popularity of the marriage classified especially amongst the petty bourgeoisie is an indication of the impact of urbanisation and migration on the marriage practice of the Sinhalese. As discussed in the introduction, migration of middle-class families from the village to Colombo for education and employment purposes increased in the post-independent era. Although many families continued to have close contact with their kinship networks in the village, they were, I believe, eager to assimilate into the urban milieu, and, therefore, sought alliances with other urban middle-class families. Because of their status as new migrants into the city, these families did not have an established kin network through which marriages could be contracted. Marriages amongst the more established middle-classes in Colombo were often arranged through relatives and friends—a practice that continues somewhat more informally even today. Families who did not have these networks or a firmly established status to initiate inquiries into suitable partners found the marriage classifieds an important channel through which an appropriate spouse could be found. In the use of official or unofficial intermediaries, families had to rely on that particular person's evaluation of their family background. The classifieds, however, provided the advertiser greater control over how their family backgrounds were constructed, while also providing the opportunity to indicate clearly what was expected from the prospective spouse. Population growth coupled with an expanding middle-class population explains the

[66] The information in this section is based on the research I conducted in the National Archives of Sri Lanka during my fieldwork. I used the *Silumina*—a Sinhala weekly published by the state owned Associated Newspapers of Ceylon from 1930 onwards—as a case study due to its wide circulation. I selected a Sunday newspaper from two selected years of every decade for my brief analysis.

increasing use of the marriage classifieds as an efficacious method through which to find a suitable partner.

The first marriage classified to be published in the *Silumina* was in January 1962. [67] [68] Between 1962 and 1969 the number of classifieds published every week ranged between one and ten. In the 1970s the numbers had risen to between 50-100 per week, and by the 1980s around 300-500 marriage classifieds were published every Sunday. In the first decade of the twenty-first century the number of classifieds published on a Sunday was between 700 and a 1000. This exponential increase has resulted in a number of Sunday newspapers publishing the marriage classifieds in a pull-out magazine format for easy reference. By the end of the twentieth century a majority of these advertisements continued to be placed by families working in the state sector and living in the capital city and its suburbs. However, in recent years the number of advertisements being placed by families living in neighbouring towns in the Western Province has increased as well as those living in other urban centres like Kandy, Kurunegala, and Galle—an indication of increasing urbanisation and an expanding middle-class.

The information provided in the matrimonial provides insight into what is considered to be the most important criteria for a marriage alliance. The first classified published in the *Silumina* newspaper in 1962 indicated the groom's place of residence, religion, caste, profession, skills, and age. It also indicated that the groom came from a "respectable" *(vædagat)* family with property and had siblings who worked for the

[67] The establishment of the first Buddhist press in 1862 led to the rapid growth of a vibrant press in the Sinhala and Tamil languages and resulted in a mass readership by the 1940s. In the first two decades, an average of 18 newspapers and periodicals were launched per year and the numbers rose to 55 in the next ten years (Wickramasinghe 2006).

[68] According to Karunanayake (2000) marriage classifieds had begun to appear as early as the first decade of the 20th century with two Sinhala language papers—*Silumina* and *Sinhala Balaya*—publishing matrimonial advertisements from the mid-1940s (pp.91-92). Although Karunanayake's study claims that marriage classifieds appeared in the *Silumina* from the mid-1940s, I did not come across any until January 1962. However, from March 1930 to December 1961 the paper regularly published marriage announcements, open invitations requesting "family and friends" known to the families to attend the marriage ceremony, and appreciations thanking guests who had attended a wedding. All these public announcements carried the respective families' full names, occupations and place of origin, and residence, and also the bride's and groom's names and occupations. From the details provided, it is clear that a majority of these advertisements were placed by the petty bourgeoisie and recent migrants to the city.

Government sector. The prospective bride had to be from one of the two high-caste groups, younger than the groom, of "pure character" (*pirisudu caritayak*) and "good health" (*nirōgi*), "educated"—preferably a teacher, and "with an inheritance" (*dāyādayak samaga*). A copy of the horoscope was requested with the application. In some cases the advertisement claimed that the groom is a teetotaller and was neither a smoker nor gambler (*surā-sūduven tora*). In the classifieds placed by the bride's family the woman's physical appearance is usually described in terms of her complexion—usually "fair" (*pæhæpat)* and sometimes neither fair nor very dark (*talelu*)*,* and height—usually "medium" (*sāmānya)*. Sometimes the woman was described as "pretty" (*rūmat*). The marriage classified is almost always placed by parents, and sometimes by an older sibling, indicating that arranged marriages continued to be initiated by family.

The format of the marriage classified has not dramatically changed in the last fifty years and indicates a mix of caste, class, and other socio-economic status considerations that are still critical to marriage. These include property and other assets, education, profession, and place of residence. Religion and caste continue to be the first set of information provided followed by education and profession. Place of residence and property also continue to be mentioned along with the person's age. In the 1970s some advertisements noted if the bride or groom wore 'European' or 'traditional Sinhala' dress and whether he/she could read and write in English. The divide between 'English-speaking' and 'Sinhala-speaking', as mentioned previously, is an important marker of difference within the middle-class. From the 1990s onwards a greater emphasis seems to be placed on education as evidenced by the listing of academic and professional qualifications of prospective brides and grooms. In fact, one of my respondents—Ramani—told me that they had given up looking for a prospective bride for her brother from the papers because *"the women were too qualified"* for him. Ramani's brother had only his A-levels and worked in a small private company.

At the same time a number of advertisements begin to appear claiming that the caste status of prospective applicants was irrelevant even though the caste of the advertiser

is indicated. Moreover, the number of advertisements placed on behalf of people who are divorced also became more common. These advertisements usually claim their son or daughter to be the "innocent" or "aggrieved" party, and some claim that the marriage is unconsummated. This indicates the general attitude towards divorce.

From the 1990s onwards the number of people in their late 30s to mid-40s looking for partners has also increased. The way in which this group present themselves indicates the importance of getting married even at a later stage of life. Very often such people claim to have a 'malefic horoscope', implying that this was one of the reasons for a late marriage.[69] A number of them also claim to look "younger" than their age (*lābāla penumak æti*). Older men claimed to be "kind" (*karunāvanta*), while many of the unmarried women list substantive property written in their name. Whereas in the 1970s and 1980s a majority of the advertisements were being placed by teachers and other state employees, the number of 'business families' (*viyāpārika pavul*) placing advertisements seems to have increased from the 1990s onwards, indicating, once again, the expansion of the middle-class.

Like Gunavatī's marriage, which I summarized at the outset of the chapter, several of my informants from lower-middle-class backgrounds had had marriages arranged through a marriage classified. This information was shared with me without hesitation and many of them mentioned the number of suitors who came to see them before their present husband was found. However, many from the younger generation were either embarrassed or derisive of the marriage classifieds, which they thought of as an outmoded way of finding a partner. Roshini (33), whose grandmother's arranged marriage I described previously, told me how she *"reluctantly gave in"* to her mother wanting to place an advertisement on her behalf when she remained unmarried in her late 20s. *"I told my mother, 'if you are doing this, please don't show it to me!'"* Roshini said she felt *"embarrassed […] imagine being reduced to a few lines like that?"* Later when a prospective groom had visited and did not follow-up, Roshini had asked her mother to stop responding to classifieds. *"He was a nice-enough guy actually. I didn't mind giving it a chance, but I did not expect to get rejected […] I felt cheap being*

[69] I will explain this concept in the section on 'Sinhala Marriage Rituals and Customs.'

evaluated on the basis of such superficial information." Nāmali, who was accompanying her parents to find a suitable partner for her brother through the marriage classifieds, described the women she met as *"overprotected,"* by parents with *"no social skills whatsoever."* She was more tolerant of her brother's use of the classifieds because he lived in Germany and had no other recourse to finding a compatible partner. But Nāmali found it difficult to accept that women of her generation from a similar family background as hers would concede to an arranged marriage. *"They must be so backward,"* she told me. *"These women are in their 30s! Why else would they have not found people on their own?"*

Legal Registration[70]

Although there is some evidence that the legal registration of marriage had been introduced under the Dutch, it was under the British that the registration of births and marriages were more widely enforced, especially in the southern lowlands (Goonesekere 1990; Obeyesekere 1967). Under the ordinances of 1822 and 1847 only registered marriages were considered legally valid and only legitimate children could inherit (Ibid). According to Goonesekere (1990), following these ordinances, the "Christian concept of monogamous marriage and legitimate birth […] became entrenched into the legal system of the maritime areas" (p.196). By the 1930s and 1940s legal registration was widely practised by the emerging middle-classes in villages and townships. As described in Mænikē's story at the outset, once a marriage was agreed to by the respective families, the registration often preceded the cultural wedding ceremony, but rarely replaced it. The middle generation who got married between the 1960s and 1970s mentioned how their parents and a few elderly kin accompanied them to the marriage registrar's office, usually a few months before the wedding ceremony. Often, a lunch or tea was hosted by the bride's parents for the groom's family after the registration. To this day, registration *per se* rarely denotes a marriage except in a strict legal sense unless it is accompanied at least by a simple ceremony involving a shared meal with the two families.

[70] *Cf.* Goonasekere (1990) and Ponnabalam (1985) for a discussion on the impact of colonialism on marriage and family law in Sri Lanka.

The registration also serves as an engagement ceremony and some young people talked about exchanging engagement rings and having a more elaborate celebration with relatives and friends. Sri Lankan engagements are rarely broken off. Hence getting registered or engaged only meant that the cultural marriage ceremony was to follow. Like Gunavatī who was allowed to conduct a courtship of sorts after the registration, young women talked about their parents allowing them to go out alone with their partners once they were legally registered because there was less fear of damaging their reputations as the union had been formalised. Others incorporated the legal registration into the wedding ceremony by inviting the marriage registrar to the wedding. Once the cultural rituals signifying marriage was concluded, the couple would walk to a table where the registrar would preside over the signing.

4 Sinhala Marriage – Customs and Rituals

4.1 Arranging a Marriage

Formal arranged marriages in the past were initiated by the groom's family, usually the father, or coordinated through an official marriage broker (*magul kapuva*), and characterised by a number of visits between the groom's and bride's families (Davy 1821; Peiris 1956; Yalman 1967). The primary purpose of these visits was to assess the social standing of the families to ensure they were equal in rank and, therefore, suitable for marriage (Ibid). During these visits dowry payments were discussed and the personal attributes of the prospective bride and groom were appraised. Davy (1821), for example, notes that after the dowry is agreed upon, the bride's father visits the groom's home to "learn the circumstances of the young man, the establishment he is to have, and his prospects in life," after which the groom's father pays another visit to ascertain if the bride "is younger than his son, in good health, free from ulcers and corporal blemishes, possessed of a pretty good disposition, and acquainted with the ordinary duties of a housewife" (p.285). The horoscopes of the couple were exchanged during these visits and checked for compatibility before reaching a formal

agreement (Ryan 1958; Yalman 1967).[71] The young people usually did not participate in these visits. The groom was sometimes allowed to visit the bride's home in secret to get a look at his future bride (Davy 1821; Yalman 1967).

The format of formal arranged marriages practised in urban areas from the early twentieth century onwards is not significantly different from those recorded in villages. The marriage broker was either an official *magul kapuva* or a relative acting as an unofficial negotiator. He (sometimes she) was expected to discuss the relative merits of every family including social standing in the respective community, property and wealth, educational and occupational achievements, list renowned ancestors and illustrious figures related to the family, and also expectations around dowry. The marriage broker was also expected to discuss the physical appearance of the young people when he proposed a match. Once a match between two families was made, the groom's family, usually the parents accompanied by some of their close relatives, would visit the bride's home to discuss the possibility of a marriage between their children. The visit would be returned by the bride's family mainly as a way of getting a first-hand view of their daughter's future home before formal consent was given. Similarly, horoscopes were exchanged during these visits and, in most cases, the official agreement was signalled by a second visit by the groom's family with the '*nækat pattaraya'*—a document prepared by the astrologer indicating an auspicious day and times for the various rituals of the marriage ceremony. This was considered an important document and many of the participants in this study recalled seeing these framed and hung in their ancestral homes.

In the first-hand accounts I heard, the groom always accompanied his parents on the first visit, and a number of women from the older generation recalled their first impressions of their suitors. Mallika (54) told me, for example, that her husband was *"very good looking at that time"* (*ē kālē hari lassanai*). The young woman's first appearance in public, usually after the parents' preliminary discussion, was important as there was an expectation that she would make a good impression on her prospective affines. The young woman had to be clad in a sari and serve tea and

[71] I will explain the custom of matching horoscopes in the section on 'Horoscopes.'

sweetmeats to the groom's family. Physical appearance played an important part in the selection process as evidenced by Gunavatī's rejection of her first suitor on the basis that she "*didn't like the look of him*." A woman's fair complexion and her 'pleasing' demeanour conveyed through a pleasant smile were usually highlighted during the evaluation process, as was the young man's stature and 'kind' demeanour. After tea, while the elders continued their discussion, the prospective couple were encouraged to speak to each other. These conversations were usually facilitated by younger relatives. Mallika, for example, recalled her husband's cousin asking her *"a series of questions"* while her husband *"barely spoke*. *He just kept smiling."* After the visit, a number of older women told me that their parents had asked them whether they liked the young man, often encouraging them to agree to the match if the report on the family's background was acceptable.

There were only two women from the younger generation who had gone through the process of a formal arranged marriage. Ramani (35) had already met her husband at a wedding and exchanged telephone numbers, but then consented to her parents formally arranging the marriage to him once they found out that he was *"interested"* in her. Chulani (27) had reluctantly agreed to an arranged marriage in principle, but after nearly three years, she was still to approve any. The format of the visits, however, had not significantly changed from the descriptions above. What had changed, however, was the number of prospective brides a man visited or, to put in another way, how many visits from prospective grooms a woman's family entertained. When strategic marriage alliances gained in popularity in the mid-twentieth century aided by the publication of marriage classifieds, the number of prospective brides a man visited seemed to be absurdly high. As mentioned before, Gunavatī claimed her husband had visited *"about seventy women."* According to Amali, her father had, referring to the formal tea served on the first visit, *"probably had eaten from a hundred places before he brought home my mother."* It was clearly a manner of speaking, but it also points to the expansion of the choices available due to urbanisation and the availability of motorised transport.

Today, however, the numbers seem to have decreased dramatically. Chulani's cousin—Dulani—told me that Chulani's parents *"studied the applicants very carefully […] My aunt rejects some of them based on bad hand-writing!"* Because Chulani was from a wealthy elite high-caste family and was English-speaking, the applicants were carefully sifted by their elite-status, education, and knowledge of English. According to Dulani, once the candidates were short-listed, her family deployed their networks to get more information on their family backgrounds. At the same time horoscopes were also perfunctorily checked for compatibility before a prospective groom was invited to visit. Amali (54), who was actively looking for a suitable partner for her second daughter, told me that "*there was no point wasting time hosting lunches and teas [...] it was also too expensive."* She talked about how once she had decided on the list of suitable candidates, she would *"get a quick check done by someone known"* to her as *"there was no point wasting [the family's official] astrologer's time"* before they were *"very sure."* The visits were perhaps kept to a minimum because young people, as mentioned before, were often reluctant or embarrassed by the prospect of an arranged marriage even after they had in principle consented to it. In addition, efficiency in terms of time and money seemed to be a determining factor as well.

Background Checks

In addition to the formal visits described above, families would conduct discreet inquiries in to each other's family background. Yalman (1967) records people visiting each other's villages in disguise to find out whether there were any blemishes in the family's rank (p.160). The practice of checking a family's background before agreeing to a marriage was considered to be critical by every family I spoke to, regardless of the type of marriage. Even when young people had found their partners, parents and kin considered it their responsibility to find out as much information about the prospective spouse's family before they consented to the marriage. As mentioned in her family history, Gunavatī's father had personally visited her husband's workplace and neighbourhood to verify the details he had provided. Lalanie (65) and Nayanthara (62), who were sisters, had their marriages arranged for them by their older sister's

husband. They both recalled how meticulous he was in his checking, often dispatching more than one emissary with instructions to *"talk to as many people as possible"* about the family's reputation and also to bring back a detailed report of the ancestral home. The size and quality of a person's house was an indication of their social standing and financial status. Young people, as I will discuss in the next chapter, conducted their own background checks before they agreed to a relationship. Their parents, once they found out, deployed their networks to *"get a full report."* When Gunavatī had found out about Nāmali and Sampath she told me that *"everyone helped us […] One of my husband's office colleagues knew the father."* Because Sampath had studied in an institute in which Gunavatī's brother-in-law was a lecturer, they were also able to *"get a report on him."*

4.2 Horoscopes

The subject of astrology and its practice amongst the Sinhalese is a complex one and is beyond the purview of my thesis.[72] In this section I limit the discussion of astrology to how it is thought to be relevant to and practised in the context of marriage. Specifically, I explain the changing role of astrology in marriage as part of my objective to delineate the changing marriage practices in Sri Lanka. My comparison of the 'past' and 'present' is limited in this chapter to the beliefs and practices described by the older generations in talking about the role astrology played when they were getting married as compared to its role now with regards to their children's marriages. In the next chapter I present the practices of the younger generation specifically in relation to 'self-choice' marriages. The interpretations of astrological knowledge I provide in this chapter are based on the explanations people gave me and also those given by the astrologers I interviewed.[73]

[72] The Sinhalese consult astrology for several specific purposes. At birth an astrologer is consulted to obtain an auspicious set of Sinhala letters from which the child's name should be chosen. They are later consulted to obtain an auspicious date and time to perform the rituals that mark the development of the child: the first feeding of rice, the teaching of the alphabet; for a girl child, at the point she attains puberty; and, finally, marriage. Auspicious times are also required when undertaking any new venture including laying the foundation stone to a new house, starting a new business, commencing a new job, and embarking on a long journey. In addition, astrologers are consulted to ascertain whether a person is going through a 'bad' period (*apala kālē*) due to astral influences, which would help explain misfortune and suffering, and also prevent the person from starting any new ventures.

[73] The astrologers I interviewed were those recommended by the families themselves and also included family members who had astrological knowledge.

The practice of 'matching horoscopes' of a man and woman before a marriage is considered to be part of the repertoire of 'traditional' practices associated with Sinhala-Buddhist marriage in Sri Lanka.[74] Comparing horoscopes to ascertain whether the two people are compatible is considered integral to marriage and is a practice that continues to this day within the urban Sinhala Buddhist community. Subhashini's father (Nāmali's uncle) was the only person who claimed to have, according to Subhashini, discarded "all cultural superstition" to become a "Buddhist rationalist." He had explained to his in-laws that astrology was incompatible with "a more enlightened understanding of Buddhism" and had suggested a "simple registration" instead of a pōruva ceremony conducted according to auspicious times. They had agreed because he was "more educated than them" and partly because it eased the financial burden of having an elaborate wedding. Regardless of his rationalist views, Mænikē had got Subhashini's and her brother Madhava's horoscopes cast by an astrologer. When Subhashini's in-laws requested her horoscope at the time of marriage, her father "went along with it without getting into any arguments."

Horoscopes are compared or 'matched' to analyse if they are compatible (*gælapenawā*) and whether the marriage will be a 'good' one (*hoňda*) as well as prosperous (*sārtaka*) for the individuals concerned and, by extension, their respective families. A 'good marriage' was one that was stable and endured the vicissitudes of time. Prosperity usually meant the birth of children who could rightfully inherit, look after parents in their old-age, and ensure the continuation of the lineage. Today, marriages are also described in terms of success (*diyunuva*) indicating a preoccupation with progress. From the conversations I had with people, a 'good' marriage was defined by harmonious relationships, children, and social mobility. People believe that astrology can predict the general outcome of each of these elements through the comparison of a couple's individual horoscopes.[75]

[74] The history of astrological ideas in Sri Lanka is thought to date back to the pre-Christian centuries, before Buddhism was brought to Sri Lanka and prior to the establishment of the Anuradhapura kingdom in the 4th century BC (Kemper 1979; 1980). A formal indigenous Sinhala tradition of astrology emerged in the 13th and 14th centuries (Kemper 1980, p.745). However, the history of matching horoscope prior to marriage is unknown.

[75] The main part of this process is referred to as *porondam balanawā*, whereby eight separate aspects of the two people's lives as denoted in their astrological chart are compared and then tallied to produce a

In his analysis of the role of caste and astrology in Sinhala marriage, Kemper (1979) argues that just as caste compatibility regards marriage between people of the same genus as most 'natural' due to physiological similarity and inherent compatibility, horoscopes provide information about the two people's qualities and inherent nature that can predict a secure marriage bond and a stable marriage if they are compatible. The only exception to the practice in the past, according to Kemper (1979), was when the marriage was between 'true' or classificatory cross-cousins (*nänā and massinā*), or close kin—'of the same family' (*eka pavulē*) or 'one of us' (*apēma kattiya*)—because such kin were thought to be intrinsically compatible (p.481).[76] It is no wonder then that astrology is considered critical to Sinhala-Buddhist marriage in its ability to analyse the qualities that constitute a person as well as predict the general outcome of a marital union. As discussed before, among middle-class families intent on forging alliances outside of their immediate kinship group, cross-cousin marriages was already going out of favour in the early twentieth century. In the context of a formal arranged marriage with 'outsiders', astrology plays an important role in dealing with the unknown by offering a kind of 'guarantee' that the marriage will endure. The underlying unity and similarity of the couple based on a kind of 'essence' is perhaps a way of substituting earlier kinship links.

Kemper (1979, 1980) suggests that the practice of meticulously comparing horoscopes before a marriage is a relatively new practice in Sri Lanka and a product of social change more popular in urban areas. Kemper (1980) argues that in an urban setting,

> the traditional safeguards, the visit to the prospective spouse's home and the eliciting of damaging information from neighbours about

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mathematical score. The important aspects that the *porondam* look into include (but are not limited to): (i) whether two people are like-minded including attitudes, perceptions, and outlook in life, as well as education; (ii) whether two people are of the same basic "type," which may mean similar in temperament, and is ascertained through which *ganaya* (type) a person belong to, i.e., *Dēva* (god), *Rāksha* (demon), or *ManuŞya* (human); (iii) natural attraction rather than indifference or distaste as indicated by what type of animal species a person"s general behavior is represented by; (iv) the sexual compatibility of the couple is looked into from several different perspectives including the ability of the man to satisfy the woman, sexual appetite, and also sexuality.

[76] Kemper (1979)notes that "the assurance of a secure marriage bond projected by compatible horoscopes […] is not necessary in true cross-cousin marriage. In those cases, there is a special right (*amutu ayitiyak*) between *nänā and massinā* (cross-cousins): they are intrinsically compatible because they are of one blood (*eka lē*) (p.481). In this case astrologers were consulted only to ascertain an auspicious date and time for the marriage ceremony.

> caste status and family reputation, and the bride's reputation is not always possible. [Therefore] horoscopes may reveal what the family and the neighbours do not (p.480).

Indeed, in urban areas there is a greater distance between families who are unrelated resulting in a greater number of unknown factors. This is true in the case of arranged marriages through the impersonal marriage classifieds and also in the case of 'self-choice marriages'. The popularity of astrology especially in urban areas is perhaps a response to the increased risks and lack of certitude. I would argue that in the modern context, because astrology claims to provide insight into who people are and can predict the general outcome of a union between two people, astrology seems to play a far more critical role today than it did in the past in helping people cope with the fear of the 'unknown.'

According to the narratives of my respondents, by the early twentieth century the exchange of horoscopes was an accepted practice and integral to the marriage process at least amongst upwardly mobile middle-class families living in urban and rural areas. What is unclear about the past is to what degree the horoscopes were compared and how much importance was given to the incompatibilities revealed if the socio-economic criteria was favourable. The subject of matching horoscopes before parents approved the marriage was rarely mentioned by the older generation. During the formal parental visit the horoscopes were requested only to fix an auspicious time and date for the marriage ceremony. When people did mention astrology in relation to their own marriages it was to reiterate that the horoscopes indicated *post facto* that it was a 'good' marriage. For example Darshini (48), who had met her husband at work, did not mention horoscopes at all during our discussion about how she obtained permission from her parents to marry a person of her choice. Her niece, however, later told me that during extended family gatherings, she had often heard her aunt joking about how their horoscopes indicated it was "*a very good match,"* especially in the *"crucial area of sexual compatibility."* Conversely, in the case of Subhashini's father who had rejected astrology, his wife Amaravati told me that after many years of marriage their horoscopes had been compared by an astrologer who told them that *"they do not match at all."* Subhashini told me that her father used this to reiterate to

them that *"one's intellect was far more important than astrology when making life's critical decisions."* The subject of incompatible horoscopes came up only once during a discussion about a 'self-choice' marriage that had been vehemently opposed by the bride's parents. Chandanie (78) talked about her parents disapproving of her relationship with a man from a different caste and also because he had a reputation for being a "strange sort of person" (*amutuma kenek*). When she was adamant to go ahead, his horoscope was requested through an emissary. Chandanie remembers the family astrologer advising her that the man she wanted to marry *"had the worst kind of malefic horoscope."* The unhappy marriage she had was blamed on her disregarding her parents' warning about incompatible horoscopes. The evidence suggests that when self-choice marriages of the older generations did not go against familial expectations, astrology did not play a critical role. Socio-economic considerations seemed to have had far greater import than astrology. If the status criteria were not met, then astrology was used to drive home the question of incompatibility. There is also the possibility that young women's character and, by extension, the family's reputation being at stake here. Once a romantic liaison was made known to the family, it meant that such a relationship was publicly known. Ending the relationship at this juncture could have been hugely detrimental to the family as the young woman's morality would come under scrutiny for being involved in an unsuitable relationship.

An important change in the protocol of arranged marriages today is the request for a copy of the horoscope at the outset where horoscopes are compared even before a background check is initiated. People talked about two-rounds of elimination: in the first round those who did not fit the desired socio-economic profile were disqualified; on the second round the horoscopes of the short-listed candidates are scanned for compatibility. Families usually had two categories of people they would consult about astrology. There is an official family astrologer—usually a person of renown with a busy schedule who charges a fee. There is also someone within the family or a friend or neighbour with some knowledge on astrology who are consulted for eliminating unsuitable candidates. As evidenced by Amali's statement, families saved on valuable resources by first doing a *"quick check."* Once a suitable partner was identified parents spent time and money meticulously comparing the two horoscopes, sometimes visiting

more than one renowned astrologer before they consented to the marriage. The initial process of short-listing suitable candidates is marked by modern-day preoccupations with efficiency, time management, and cost-cutting, and astrology seems to have been absorbed into the marketplace where choices are exercised.

Several participants, including astrologers, observed that the meticulous comparison of *porondam* that goes beyond the basic eight aspects in a horoscope is a relatively new practice. Mr. Chandrasoma told me that *"over-anxious parents are using astrologers like super-markets […]And there are those in our field who are happy to exploit."* The 'supermarket' analogy is significant and alludes to a number of practices that the astrologer mentioned as evidence of people's over-reliance on astrology and the exploitation of people's anxieties through the commercialisation of astrology.[77] What is important to the current discussion is the practice of visiting several astrologers to get horoscopes compared before parents finalised an arranged marriage. Making multiple visits rather than one indicates the anxiety people may be feeling about making choices in a context in which marrying an outsider meant a number of unknown factors. Perhaps people sought to mitigate these anxieties by relying on horoscopes to predict the outcome of a marriage.

4.3 The Wedding Ceremony

The central ritual of Sinhala marriage is the *pōruva* ceremony that symbolises the formalization of the marriage bond between two people. As discussed under the section on 'Sinhala-Buddhist Marriage', the ceremony consists of a number of elaborate rituals whose cultural significance and historicity are as debatable as they are various (cf. Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988). Here I provide a brief account of

[77] Consulting an astrologer for an auspicious time to lay the foundation of a house and for a time to move in were considered traditional practices. However, the need for auspicious times were said to be increasing with people wanting them to conclude transactions like buying land or a vehicle, and business people asking for times to conduct important 'deals'. The most recent development is the use of astrology in caesarean births. According to one astrologer people are now requesting auspicious times for the performance of a C-section in order to not only minimize the risks such a procedure may have, but also ensure their children are born during an auspicious time. I confirmed this practice with a gynaecologist who said that some of his colleagues do try to accommodate these requests as long as it fits in with their schedule.

the ceremony and avoid in-depth description as it does not directly pertain to my thesis.

In the early historical accounts of the seventeenth to early nineteenth centuries, the *pōruva* took place once the trial period had ended and it was clear that the couple would remain married (Knox 1681; Davy 1821). In Davy's description, the *pōruva* is nothing more than a plank of Jak wood on which the couple stood.[78] The ceremony consists of tying their little fingers together and pouring water on the wife's head and also the exchange of rings signifying their union for life (Davy 1821, p.286). According to Peiris (1956), because the contract of marriage was easily terminated, the rituals that symbolised an indissoluble bond like the tying of hands and that of fertility—the pouring of water—were only conducted if the marriage ceremony "was intended to symbolize the conclusion of a relatively permanent union, contracted with a view to raising a family" (p.201).

From the mid-20th century onwards the wedding ceremony became more elaborate, at first due to the influence of the Buddhist revival and later due to the influence of the market. The raised platform was constructed with an awning under which the couple stood for the ceremony and was decorated with dried coconut leaves. Various symbols of fertility and prosperity decorated the dais: rice, along with several other indigenous grains were strewn on the floor on which the couple would stand, and pots filled with coconut flowers (*pun kalasa*) were placed on either side of the structure. Today the *pōruva* is an extravagant structure and has numerous designs from the 'traditional' *gok kola* (coconut leaves) designs to modern canopies created with fresh flowers and supported by roman pillars. The ceremony was usually conducted by an elder of the family, but now has been replaced by someone generally referred to an '*aṣṭaka*', a professional officiator of the *pōruva* ceremony. He is usually a respected member of the community like a teacher who is also a self-proclaimed 'cultural' scholar. Every one of the a*ṣṭaka* people I spoke to told me that they were *"knowledgeable about ancient traditions of the Sinhala people"* and often quoted long

[78] The Jak tree is considered a "milk" tree (*kiri gaha*) on account of its milk-like sap and, therefore, a sign of fertility.

passages from various texts in highly Sankritised Sinhala to indicate the authenticity of the ceremony as well as their role in it.[79]

The ceremony is designed to invoke the ties of family and kinship and establish marriage as a union between families rather than two people. Although the *aṣṭaka* presides over the ceremony, all the important rituals are conducted by family members. The groom, and then the bride, enters the wedding hall in procession preceded by ceremonial drummers and dancers and accompanied by their extended families. The bride and groom ascend the *pōruva* together; the groom is usually helped by his father while the bride is assisted by a maternal uncle. After this the couple's little fingers are tied together with a golden chord by the maternal uncle and water is poured from a special vessel on to the couple's fingers by the bride's father. The chord is then removed by the groom's father. Rings are exchanged between the couple followed by the groom tying a necklace on the bride. He then gifts the bride a sari, which she will wear for the going-away ceremony—which is when the bride and groom officially leave the wedding as a married couple, or the home-coming ceremony, which is celebrated when the bride enters the groom's home. The bride and groom also feed each other milk-rice and a glass of milk. The rings and other gifts that the couple exchange on the *pōruva* are always handed to them by their parents and elders, indicating that the gift is given as a collective. The giving of clothes is most often followed by the exchange of gifts between the two families, which the *aṣṭaka*—Mr. Amarasekera—told me was *"important for cementing the links between the two families."* The next part of the ceremony is highly emotive: the *aṣṭaka* implores the couple through various chants to remember with gratitude the sacrifices their parents have made on their behalf and the young couple are always reduced to tears during this part of the ceremony.[80] After this the couple worships their parents as is the Sinhala custom and then proceed to worship all their elders symbolising their mutual

[79] I must confess that I barely understood what they were saying in these instances.

[80] The *aṣṭaka* usually chants about the bride's mother describing in detail the sacrifices a mother must make on behalf her children and highlighting the giving of breast milk as the ultimate sign of sacrifice and affection. The groom then gifts the mother a certain quantity of white cloth as payment for all that she has done. Sometimes there is a brief speech about the father's role in bringing up children.

integration into each others' families.[81] This is followed by the singing of the *jaya mangala gāta* by a group of pre-pubescent or virgin girls after which the couple descends the *pōruva* with the help of their fathers.

What is important to highlight here is the way in which the ritual represented as if it is closely linked to Buddhism, and is conducted as if it were a sacred ceremony. As such, the *pōruva* dais itself is described by the *aṣṭakas* as a sacred space the couple inhabits during the solemnization of their union and is compared to a *dēvālē*—a temple where gods and goddesses are said to dwell and are worshipped. The ceremonial exit from the *pōruva* is described as the couple's ritual re-entry to society, but now with a changed status as both adults and a new family unit. The *aṣṭakas* all assert that the *pōruva* ceremony dates back to when Prince Siddhartha got married and is, therefore, central to Sinhala- Buddhist marriage.[82]

Thus far, my description of the *pōruva* ceremony evokes an image of a rather solemn ceremony. The contemporary version, however, has been modified to include some 'lighter' moments as well as devices to include the participation of the guests in the ritual. My memories of the *pōruva* ceremony from a decade ago were of it being a rather private ritual in which only close family members participated. The ritual did not have any element of the spectacle or entertainment in it; neither did it require the participation of guests. Hence, during the *pōruva* guests usually chatted with each other. In the *pōruva* ceremonies I witnessed during my field work the *aṣṭaka* assumes the role of a 'master or ceremonies' and addresses all the guests with a short speech about the significance of the ritual they are about to observe and are told that their collective witnessing is part of what authorises the bride and groom to re-enter society at the end of the ceremony as a married couple. Printed copies of the *jaya mangala*

[81] Worshipping parents and elders as a form of respect at important events like weddings and puberty rituals and celebration like the Sinhalese New Year for example, is a common practice among the Sinhalese. This involves the young person placing their palms together, kneeling, and touching his/her forehead to the elders' feet.

[82] It is perhaps ironic that Prince Siddhartha later renounced marriage when he embarked on a journey that eventually led to him becoming the Buddha. Furthermore, the early Buddhist scriptures do not contain any description of Prince Siddhartha's wedding. While marriage is referred to in the scriptures, there are no references to the details of marriage ceremonies (Personal communication: Prabhath Sirisena. 23 January 2013)

gāta are then distributed to the guests who are encouraged to sing with the young girls. During the ceremony, some of the *aṣṭakas* explained the meaning of each ritual as it was conducted; they also cracked jokes at various points in the ceremony mainly about *"feeding each other well, but watching their weight"* and *"tying the chord well to prevent flight-risk"* and so on. Although the *aṣṭakas* reiterated the cultural authenticity of the ceremony, the impact of modernity was apparent, even amusing, in the way the *aṣṭaka* person would pause between rituals to chant in the same tone—*"now the photographer can take a picture*—before moving onto the next. Mr. Amarasekera told me that the photographers were *"very disruptive"* in the way they *"jumped around during the ceremony"* and this was his way of *"controlling them."*

What is significant is how this particular form of marriage, which was, as evidenced by the early ethnographies, only practised by some families in the upper-strata of village society, is imagined by the present middle-classes as characterizing 'traditional' Sinhala marriage. A recollection of such a monolithic past is perhaps partly a consequence of people grappling with the rapid pace of social change in the twentieth century. A belief in a stable and authentic past contributes to people's sense of identity and rootedness even as they cope with change (Hobsbawm 1972; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). In addition, these recollections also attest to an actual change in practice as a result of the emerging middle-class moving away from common-law and cross-cousin marriage in favour of strategic alliances with outsiders by the early twentieth century. In some instances the oldest generation claimed they had an arranged marriage or the middle-generation claimed an arranged marriage for their parents when this may not have been technically accurate, partly because they did not have the terminology with which to describe other kinds of marriage. It was also perhaps a way of asserting their family status in the village.

5 Commercial Weddings – Glamour and Romance

While the *pōruva* ceremony continues to be the central ritual of the Sinhala-Buddhist marriage ceremony, the move to urban centres impacted the marriage ceremony in several ways. For pragmatic reasons like the lack of space and the absence of the

community to help with the preparations, the marriage could no longer be held at home and began to be held at a public venue, namely reception halls and hotels. At the same time, some of the preparations that were traditionally undertaken by the different caste-groups in the village were taken over by commercial service providers, including the preparation of the wedding meal. Finally, guests at the wedding were no longer restricted to the two kin groups, but included friends, neighbours, and work colleagues. Despite these significant changes however, until recently the wedding arrangements continued to be handled by parents and kin and the bride and groom would usually take a back seat during this time.

Today, young people have become both the central actors and chief choreographers of their weddings with parents usually taking a backseat in the preparations. Parents continue to finance the wedding and get involved in drawing up of the guest list and making sure the pōruva ceremony is conducted in the 'traditional' manner. However, parents talked about wedding preparations as a time when they indulged young people's desires by letting the couple decide on the mainly aesthetic details of the wedding including clothes and jewellery, the décor, music, entertainment, and also food. For example, Gunavatī compared her wedding to that of her daughter's in an amused tone of voice.

> *Don't you know her wedding was a grand affair; ours was a simple one. Nāmali planned everything. I didn't do anything. We only provided the money. We were not given any responsibilities. She discussed with us. She invited that group [...]then another dancing group. Flower arrangements, the bridal, the sari—I didn't get hassled about any of these things. [Nāmali] did everything on her own. I was involved in only the making of the cake. She even bought the saris. I bought a sari initially, but she did not like. She asked me 'can you wear such a sari for my wedding!' She spent much more and bought me a more expensive sari[...] I didn't really like all this fuss, but young people today don't like their parents' tastes isn't it?*

For the young people I spoke to, planning the wedding ceremony is the first major project they undertake together as a couple and is an important demonstration of their capacity to coordinate a major event. At the conclusion of a wedding, guests will usually thank the parents for hosting a sumptuous wedding while complimenting the

young couple's tastes in organizing a 'beautiful' wedding.

Moreover, young people's desire to assert their individuality is skilfully catered to by the market. Beauticians, florists, banquet managers, and more recently wedding planners, equally indulge the young couple's visions of a 'perfect' wedding by offering them a range of 'choices'. Decisions must be made at every turn: picking an appropriate venue and menu; selecting clothes and jewellery in consultation with the bridal dresser; choosing an appropriate theme and décor for the wedding and discussing these ideas with florists; deciding on the cake structure; and figuring out the kinds of entertainment during the wedding including music for dancing, and dancers to fill, what Nāmali called the *"awkward gaps,"* between the different rituals and so on. The market is prepared to indulge even the wildest of fantasies from converting halls to winter wonderlands with fake snow or underwater kingdoms with models dressed up as mermaids. Every desire is a choice offered in the market. If young people do not want to light the traditional oil lamp because it is too 'common', then a more innovative and 'unique' lamp is produced comprising candles. If the traditions of cake cutting and champagne fountains are deemed too 'Western', then the market offers structures made with traditional milk rice (*kiribat)* and a milk fountain that is more in keeping with Sinhala 'culture' while artists offer to build a 'traditional' wedding dais using coconut leaves rather than ones decorated with 'modern' flowers and candles.

Sahlins (1976) posits that different societies have different sites of symbolic production: in the West it is the economy, while in others it can be religion. Sahlins explains that the "cultural scheme [of a society] is variously inflected by a dominant site of symbolic production, which supplies the major idiom of other relations and activities" (pp.210-211). Sahlins' argument that "economic symbolism is structurally determining" (p.211) resonates with the way the market seems to have taken over marriage in Sri Lanka. While cultural-religious symbols frame the Sinhala marriage ceremony, it is the market that seems to structure it.

The Wedding Reception

The blending of the 'old' and 'new' seem to happen seamlessly and rarely did any one, except the *aṣṭaka*, comment on the incongruity between what was deemed 'traditional' and what was thought of as 'modern.' Mr. Amarasekera had told me how *"these days people are eating kiribat and drinking champagne"* drawing attention to the incongruity between feeding of the 'traditional' rice cooked in coconut milk that takes place on the 'sacred' *pōruva* and the alcohol that is consumed during the toast. On one occasion I sat and watched the preparations that had commenced at 5.00am diligently taking notes on how the *pōruva* was prepared with great solemnity by another *aṣṭaka* Mr. Weeratunge. He was dressed in white sarong and shirt and was barefoot because the *pōruva* was considered a sacred space. After placing each ritual object on the dais, Mr. Weeratunge would place his palms together and bow his head in obeisance. At the same time two young women were setting up the wedding cake—a five tiered structure with pink and blue flowers and silver hearts. The florist had already set up two silver archways with cascading flowers leading from the entrance of the hallway to the *pōruva*. A little later, a group of young men dressed in tight black jeans, silver shirts, and gelled hair walked in and started testing the microphones and strobe lights that had been set up next to the dance floor. They were the wedding band one of whose members happened to be Mr. Weeratunga's son. Some time later the group of traditional dancers and drummers as well as young girls who sing the *jaya mangala gāta* walked in and greeted Mr. Weeratunga.[83] The young girls were all dressed in pants and t-shirts or *kurta* tops, but changed into the 'traditional' *lamā sari* for the ritual.[84] The list of contrasts I could compose is much longer and the mixing of the 'traditional' with the 'modern' seemed bizarre the more I observed weddings. What is critical to note, however, is the way in which people accepted them as part of the wedding packages on offer.

[83] The dance troupe and the young women were all known to Mr. Weeratunga who offered a 'package deal' with his services.

[84] The *lamā sari*—derived from the cloth and jacket worn by village women—was created during the Buddhist revival as a more appropriate dress for young school-going girls (Wickramasinghe 2006).

The Beautician-Bridal Dresser

The visit to the beautician-cum-bridal dresser prior to the wedding is an important ritual in the lives of young women in Sri Lanka. Very often following the setting of an auspicious date and time, it is the first step in preparing for their marriage. Just as dates are often set almost a year ahead, especially if the wedding is being planned in a popular hotel, the visit to the beautician is also encouraged to be undertaken well in advance for several reasons. Beauticians I interviewed talked about how young people usually visit them armed with bridal magazines and with an idea of what they would like to look like on their wedding day. The aim is to *"look beautiful"* and beauticians spoke of their commitment to *"transforming ordinary looking girls into stunning brides"* because *"everyone wants to look their best on their wedding day."* Beauticians usually recommend a full skincare and hair-care regime to ensure that the young woman will look as perfect as possible. Facials are scheduled monthly or bi-monthly and a strict diet with no sweets is recommended to ensure the bride loses weight and her skin is clear of pimples. Brides are also asked to *"grow out"* their hair and also their *"badly shaped eyebrows"* before they can be restyled and reshaped in time for the wedding. Bridal dressers also volunteer advice on choosing the appropriate shade of white for the wedding sari based on the bride's skin tone and also about the kind of styles that will match the bride's build and stature. Through these discussions, beauticians draw the bride's attention to herself and encourage her to indulge her desire for looking beautiful and endorse her vision of a glamorous wedding. The regular visit to the beautician is a time of personal preparation and a process through which a young woman transforms herself into a beautiful bride on the day she achieves adult status.

Wedding Photographs

Another important ritual that has been introduced is the photographic session that precedes the marriage ceremony. This 'ritual' is given prominence as the wedding album is often the only tangible memory of the wedding. Professional wedding photographers typically insist on at least three hours for the session. This means that the bride has to be dressed several hours before the wedding ceremony. Because the

bridal dressers also ask for at least three to four hours to dress the bride and her retinue, this usually means the bride having to wake up very early in the morning, sometimes as early as 2 am if it is a morning wedding. The posing for photographs is a public performance of an ideal, romantic, and sentimentalized image of the marital relationship (Edwards 1989) exemplified in the way the couple are encouraged to strike intimate poses usually forbidden in public. These include gazing into each other's' eyes, holding hands, and tight embraces often shot with a soft background or on a beach or a lush garden that infuse the pictures with an almost fairy-tale quality. In fact, the 'story book' album is the latest format in wedding albums where the photographer uses pictures from the couple's childhood to set up a story about young lovers whose individual journeys ends with the consummation of the couple's love through their marriage to each other.

The photographs also provide a space in which the young people are able to express their sexualized selves within a legitimate arena (Osella 2012). Despite parents consenting to young people's choice of partners, courtship before marriage is an ambivalent area involving much anxiety about young women's morality and the family's reputation. Therefore, before the wedding the couple is discouraged from meeting in public places and serious social sanctions in the form of rumours aimed at damaging a young woman's character are meted out resulting in parents imposing severe restrictions on mobility. As a result, the photo shoot is also a space in which young people are able to act out fantasies and imitate 'Western' modes of intimacy through cuddling and kissing and other public displays of affection which are rarely seen even among younger married couples today. In other words, the wedding photographs belie the social restrictions on public expressions of sentiment and intimacy by producing an image of a carefree couple in love, freely enjoying each other's company. Couples are also instructed to strike poses from Hollywood films like 'Charlie's Angels' and James Bond movies demonstrating that wedding photos and videos are another site where the modern desire for romance, glamour, and lavish spending are expressed through fantasy (Osella 2012). Long after the excitement of the wedding has faded, wedding photos and albums are prominently displayed in middle-class homes I visited as reminders of this idealised and romantic vision of conjugality.

6 Conclusion

This chapter has provided an overview of the marriage practises of the Sinhala-Buddhist middle-classes in urban Sri Lanka, and such an overview has not allowed for the more in-depth discussion 'self-choice' marriage requires, which I will take up in the next chapter. The overall story is certainly one of change. Influenced by urbanisation and commercialisation, and also by the nationalist movement of the late nineteenth century, Sinhala-Buddhist marriage practices have significantly changed. Strategic marriage alliances characterised by elaborate wedding rituals have become the norm amongst all sections of the middle-class. The assertion of status and class mobility is central to these marriages, and will be discussed in depth in chapter six. Contemporary marriages are also causing anxiety amongst middle-class families because they are no longer taking place between kin or close associates and are instead being 'chosen', either by parents or children from outside their immediate sphere of influence. An intense preoccupation with investigating people's family backgrounds and also a greater reliance on horoscopes seems to be ways of mitigating a sense of anxiety stemming from marrying 'outsiders'. I take up this discussion on the reinterpretation of cultural resources in the following chapter. What is important to highlight here is that many of these changes do not neatly map onto conventional interpretations of 'tradition' as constricting and 'modern' as progressive.

Edwards (1989), in his discussion of modern Japanese weddings, characterises the wedding industry as "clever" in adeptly exploiting the various needs and desires of modern Japanese people from enabling families to display their economic success, assert traditional corporate Japanese values, while also indulging young people's yearning for stardom by providing an opportunity for the couple to star in an elaborate production for one day (pp.135-136). In Sri Lanka too, the commercial wedding brings together the collective desire to assert class status, individuality, and difference. Moreover, the commercial wedding as both a production choreographed by the couple and also as a show in which they play the leading role raises an important question about young people's claim to agency. Do these changes in the ritual arena reflect equally significant changes in the relational and personal domains of young

people's lives? In the following chapters I look at how the commercial wedding successfully hides 'backstage' negotiations and compromises that young people make by presenting a 'front stage' performance that promote the modern ideals of individuality and choice (Goffman 1959).

5 – Agency as Responsibility
'Self-choice' Marriages in Contemporary Sri Lanka

1 Introduction

In the family history I presented at the outset of chapter four I drew attention to how individual choice was underscored in Nāmali's narrative about choosing her future husband in contrast to her grandmother's and mother's narratives, which placed greater emphasis on conforming with parental expectations. As I will demonstrate in this chapter, individual agency was central to the younger generations' narratives about marriage with choosing one's marriage partner being integral to the presentation of the 'self' as modern and progressive. I use Collier's (1997) central thesis in her ethnography of marriage practices in Andalucía as a starting point to think about narratives of agency deployed in Sri Lanka. As discussed in chapter one, Collier argues that the younger generation's claim to be "thinking for one's self" is not an indication of greater agency in acting out their inner desires, but signals a change in the "concepts and practices people used for managing their presentations of self and for interpreting the actions of others" (p.6). Through the narratives of the older and younger generations I show that the significant difference between the generations is not encapsulated in the way marriage practices have changed, but in the narrative devices used in representing the self when talking about marriage. The older generation often deferred to the collective in presenting their lives as governed by parental expectations; if choices were made it was because they already knew that they were tacitly approved by parents and kin. In contrast, the younger generation present the self as the principal navigator of their life course, often claiming to act on the basis of inner desire rather than social expectations. They claimed to make independent decisions motivated by personal preferences which their parents had to eventually accept. On the one hand, unlike the narratives of the older generation that foregrounded respect for kin and compliance to social norms, young people's narratives about choice in marriage seem to be produced within the ideological

framework of the modern individual. However, I extend Collier's deconstruction of narratives that reveal the centrality of agency to modern subjectivity to explore the impact of agency in people's lives. In other words I ask: how do people think about and manage a 'self' they see as different and as less constrained than those of their parents and grandparents? Collier and others discuss how the emphasis on individual agency creates an illusion of greater freedom in letting people believe their lives are less restrained by social norms (Collier 1997, Abu-Lughod 1990). My fieldwork revealed that people are often anxious about making choices and discerning what they should do regarding marriage. In making decisions people continuously weigh the consequences of enacting their inner desires against their accountability to family and kin. I argue in this chapter, therefore, that in Sri Lanka people experience agency as a burden and regard it as a responsibility they must take seriously.

The burden of agency as a responsibility further complicates 'everyday' understandings of agency as 'freedom' by what I perceive as a collective investment in the choosing person. In the rest of South Asia, despite the greater emphasis on companionate marriage, arranged endogamous marriage continues to be the norm in both preference and practice amongst the middle-classes (Donner 2002; Fuller and Narasimhan 2008; Lindberg 2009; Osella and Osella 2000; C. Osella 2012). In certain middle-class contexts in North India and Bangladesh love marriages are seen as disruptive of traditional kinship relations and the social order, often resulting in inter-generational rifts and even violence (Mody 2008). Although I am cautious about presenting Sri Lanka as a special case in South Asia as demographers and development theorists have historically done, there are, nevertheless, certain characteristics of the shift to companionate marriage that make Sri Lanka different from her South Asian neighbours (*Cf.* Caldwell et al 1989; Kirk 1969; Myrdal 1968). Whereas in South Asia the change in marriage practice is recorded as becoming more widespread in the latter part of the twentieth century, in Sri Lanka the shift seems to have taken place in the mid-twentieth century. Today 'love' marriages have become the norm rather than an exception amongst the urban middle-class. I argue that such a tolerance hinges far more on the middle-class' collective investment in modernity than historical timing. I will show that in Sri Lanka marriages based on choice are seen by both the younger

and older generations as an important marker of modernity. Such a collective investment in the choosing person, I argue, gives rise to different kinds of tensions and anxieties that shape the choices people eventually make. I suggest that beneath the surface of these optimistic accounts of the choosing person is a counter discourse about the risks and responsibilities of agency. At one level these anxieties stem from the more straightforward concern for getting it right in the present for the sake of their future happiness. At another level, people are concerned about the impact of their choices on family honour and family cohesion. People are, therefore, continuously evaluating the risks associated with their choices against their sense of responsibility to the collective. In doing so, rather than discarding traditional cultural resources as irrelevant to modern life, I show how people continue to rely on cultural resources like astrology and meticulous 'background checks' of families and re-interpret them to manage the anxieties associated with choice.

2 Choosing a Partner - Agency and 'Self-choice' Marriages

Donner (2008) argues that the distinction between 'arranged' and 'love' marriage rests on the notion of agency: a love-marriage is marked by the agency of the partners in "initiating a pre-marital relationship" (p.83). In Sri Lanka too a distinction is drawn in every-day conversations between marriages that are arranged by parents and elders on behalf of their children and those that are initiated by young people themselves. Individual agency marks the boundary between a marriage that takes place after a discussion between the two families (*katā karalā*), and those that take place after the couple '*became friends'* (*yālu velā*), which refers to the initiative taken by the young couple in choosing their marriage partner.[85] Parents often referred to their children's marriages as taking place "*according to [the young couple's] liking*" (*ēgollangē kæmætta).* Because it is agency and not love that is emphasized in differentiating between the two types of marriages, I use the term "self-choice" marriage when talking about what is conventionally know in the literature as 'love marriage'.

[85] The Sinhala term '*katā karalā'* has now been mostly replaced by the Anglicized term 'proposal', which refers to the process through which a marriage proposal is presented by the groom's family for consideration by the bride's family.

I was told by several people from the English-speaking middle-class that the terms 'love marriage' or 'love-affair' were commonly used in the 1950s and 1960s to talk about marriages that were preceded by a romantic relationship. As I will show in this section, these terms, however, were rarely used by the people I spoke with in referring to their own experience. This is perhaps partly because some of them were from Sinhala speaking families and 'love' is not a commonly used term in the language. I also believe that the term 'love' when coupled with 'affair' tends to have an immoral undertone within the context of marriage because it implied, on the one hand, an intimacy prior to marriage that could have implications on a woman's character and reputation. On the other hand, these terms also suggested that people were giving into their emotions rather than their good sense when making a critical life decision. This did not mean that sentiment was not central to these types of relationships. In fact, as I will show, feelings and sexual intimacy were fundamental to people's experiences of these relationships. However, from initiating a romantic relationship to making the decision to get married, it was not love but choice that defined the process through which people deliberated their options to finally make the 'right' decision.

In this section I first define 'self-choice' marriages using the contrasts people drew to differentiate them from 'proposals' or arranged marriage. I then examine the contrasting ways the concept of agency is deployed in the narratives of the older and younger generations in their reflections about their own or others' marriages to argue that rather than a dramatic change in actual practice, these narratives signal a fundamental shift in the concepts used to talk about the self. I conclude the section by asserting that in Sri Lanka there seems to be a collective investment in choice and that the choosing person is integral to urban middle-class families' self-presentation(s) and assertions of being modern and progressive.

2.1 Defining a 'Self-Choice' Marriage

Individual choice based on personal preferences and desires was how a self-choice marriage was distinguished from an arranged marriage based on parental authority and kinship obligations. Chulani (27) belonged to a middle income middle-class family.

Her father was an Engineer and spoke English while her mother—a housewife—did not. Chulani had started working in the NGO sector after earning her Bachelor's degree from New Zealand and was about to start on a Masters degree when I interviewed her. Chulani was under tremendous pressure to get married because she was close to her 30s; her parents had already started looking for someone on her behalf because she was not romantically involved with anyone at that time.

> *My mother has this huge criteria about who I should get married to. I have rebelled against that so much. I tell her, "You hardly know me how the hell are you going to select a person for me!" I mean it is ridiculous. With my mother I would hardly have discussions about anything […]She asked me one day "so what kind of a person are you looking for?" I was like, "are you serious?" It's so uncomfortable like to talk about those things because it is such a personal thing you know getting married or not getting married. It should be your choice and it has nothing to do with anything else.*

Chulani thought of herself as being radically different from her mother who had had an arranged marriage and was content to be a housewife; therefore, she could not imagine how her mother could even understand what kind of partner her daughter preferred. For Chulani marriage was first and foremost a matter of individual choice and choosing a marriage partner or even the decision to be married was something she thought of as personal, not a decision that could be made on behalf of her by her parents.

A self-choice marriage was also what participants generally regarded as desirable. It was seen as being 'better' than an arranged marriage because it was based on an affective bond between the husband and wife that fostered intimacy and understanding between them. When I asked Pahan (30) what he thought of marriage while growing up, he responded by talking about his parents.

> *I wanted to be like my parents […] They had had a love marriage. They had studied together in the same school. They often talked about those days. They had started [life] in a very small place. They had tirelessly worked to build a life together […] I used to think, 'this is how I want it to be.' What I mean is I wanted to be with someone who would support me in everything. So my goal was to be like my parents.*

Here Pahan describes his parents' marriage as a partnership or a cohesive unit working towards a collective goal. What is significant is that Pahan attributes the success of the partnership to the fact that it was a love marriage rather than an arranged one. Immediately after this, Pahan compares his happy childhood with that of some of his friends who were unhappy because their parents had *"a lot of problems between them,"* implying that 'love' or self-choice marriages contributed to family harmony and happiness.

Self-choice marriages were also based on strong 'feelings' towards the other person and this was often preceded by attraction. Dulani (34) spoke about having a *"crush"* on her husband Ranjan who lived in the same neighbourhood as hers from the time she was around thirteen.

> *[My sister and I] used to go to Ranjan's place to play with his sisters. He didn't join in because he was much older […] I was interested in him although I don't think at that time he took any notice of me[…] I had told my three close friends in school that I was interested in Ranjan and every morning they waited to hear the latest update. It was so exciting […] His sisters weren't very close to him because he had a bad temper […]and he was quite domineering. But I was attracted to him maybe because I saw him as a 'real man' […] Maybe because I didn't have a father I was attracted to a man like Ranjan.*

At first Dulani could not quite explain what was it that attracted her to Ranjan except to acknowledge that he had evoked some feelings within her that aroused her 'interest' in him. It is later that Dulani applies a psychological explanation as to why she may have been drawn to Ranjan. As described by Nāmali at the beginning—*"outside we were friends, but internally I was feeling something towards him*"—these feelings were often experienced as something 'internal' and were thought of as significant precisely because of the quality of interiority. What is interesting is that even though many people intimated that an emotional bond preceded a self-choice marriage, these feelings were often only tacitly acknowledged and were rarely articulated in concrete verbal terms. Nāmali told me how Sampath *"had never asked [her]. From that time up to today, now a boy usually asks for consent, but he has never."* Even Nāmali could not articulate clearly what is it that she expected Sampath to ask her. 'Asking for consent' usually refers to a young man declaring his interest in a

young woman by informing her parents of his intentions. Here, Nāmali is most probably referring to a formal declaration of love or, at least a pronouncement of interest. But as quoted in the introduction, she knew for sure her feelings were reciprocated only when Sampath had kissed her. Dulani was equally vague about how she came to know Ranjan reciprocated her feelings. *"I was sixteen years when we started the affair[…] He was going away and* (she pauses briefly and does not continue). *Actually it was like 'I know you like me, you better like me' kind of thing."*

Self-choice marriages were also thought of as being characterised by sexual intimacy and pleasure. Sex and sexuality are not topics that are openly discussed in Sri Lanka and it was not a topic that I actively explored in my interviews mainly because I was worried about transgressing the boundary between what was already personal, that is, marriage, and what many people, myself included, thought of as private. Nevertheless, there were a number of times the topic did come up and always in relation to self-choice marriage. Desmond (78) and Marie (82) had lived in the same neighbourhood and initiated a romantic relationship when they were in their early 20s. Despite their very different socio-economic backgrounds—she came from an upper-middle-class family of professionals and he came from a lower-middle class family—and parental opposition, they had eventually married. Towards the end of an interview that had lasted more than two-and-a-half hours, Desmond told me how he had made sure Marie would be "well provided for" in any eventuality because *"she's a great woman. She gave up everything for me. I won't forget that."* In response I asked Desmond what he thought were the most memorable moments of his married life, and was unprepared for his response.

> *I must tell you before all that where [Marie] is concerned, we had a great sex life […] Before I got married I had read the Kāma Sutra and when it came to [sex] she never held anything back, [she] gave me everything […] So that way she is a very great, great woman.*

Earlier on in the interview Desmond had mentioned in passing how he used to *"sometimes sneak in to"* the back garden of Marie's house, which had been *"large [and] surrounded by a huge garden […][and] you can imagine what!"* Because of Desmond's age and my own embarrassment I did not prompt him to elaborate at that

juncture. But later it was clear that for Desmond the sexual intimacy he shared with his wife was central to his experience of marriage. Geetha (65) was from a lower-middle-class background and had married a teacher who used to board in their house. Even though Geetha's parents had been opposed to the marriage mainly because he was from a lower caste, Geetha told me she *"did not regret marrying him"* even though *"life was very difficult"* in the first years of their marriage mainly due to economic constraints. She described her husband as being *"very understanding*" and told me that *"unlike other men, he gave me chance."* Observing my puzzled expression, Geetha tried to explain: "*you know, he wasn't demanding, he gave me a chance—you understand what I am talking about no daughter?"* Despite the fact that sex was not openly talked about, it was important to Geetha to explain to me that the sexual intimacy she and her husband shared was somehow different from other married couples because he took her feelings into consideration.

In the case of the younger generation, 'sexual chemistry' was integral to the affective bond between two people. Roshini (35) related to me how in the first year of courtship she *"struggled to figure out"* whether Ashan was the right partner for her.

> *Ashan and I clicked from the very beginning […] We were friends for a long time, but there was no chemistry as far as I was concerned. There was chemistry in my mind for a long time, but not (she does not continue)[…] Because Ashan was now interested in me I thought maybe I will give it a shot […] we actually kissed but there wasn't anything there. I didn't feel it so I thought this is not working out […] Just before I was leaving to the US for my Masters […]both of us knew this was like a do or die situation because we had to make some sort of commitment […] We kissed [again] and there was chemistry. When that happened I knew. I didn't think I was going to marry him but I knew that it wasn't off the wall either.*

Roshini had spent a lot of time explaining to me why she was attracted to Ashan at an "intellectual" level and also that *"she was very comfortable with him."* But it is clear that despite the emotional bond they shared, the sexual bond was critical to figuring out whether they should get married.

Sharing sexual intimacy before marriage was also talked about in relation to self-choice marriages. A number of young people intimated to me that they had not waited until the wedding night to engage in sexual intercourse. Nāmali, for example, while talking about her wedding rituals, laughingly told me, *"We were going out for eight years, so he didn't wait till we married to do all that!"* Nāmali made the above statement while she was talking about her *pōruva* ceremony and listing out the rituals she had left out, one of which was the tying of the white cloth around the bride's waist to symbolise her virginity. Both the older and younger generations talked about certain rituals being *"unsuitable"* to the present milieu because they were *"old fashioned"* or *"out-dated."* Eliminating the ritual regarding virginity was a sign that the families did not want to make public or get involved in what was thought of as something private and personal to the couple. Despite the emphasis on women's virginity before marriage, which was discussed in chapter three, I was aware that the younger generation from the middle-class were sexually intimate with partners who they knew they would eventually marry, but generally avoided penetrative sex until after marriage. I believe this was mainly due to the emphasis on virginity and the resulting fear of damaging one's reputation and future marriage prospects if the current relationship failed. Ruwanthi (37), for example, had had sexual intercourse with her boyfriend—an army officer. When he died in battle before they got married, Ruwanthi married his alcoholic brother. When I asked her why, she told me *"you understand no why I had to? You are a woman. I had given everything to Romesh. So what choice did I have?"* I was surprised, therefore, by these bold claims.

Nishanthi (28) was a hairdresser and came from a Sinhala speaking middle-class family. She was introduced to her husband through their respective mothers who had been school friends. After the informal introduction, Gayan was permitted to visit Nishanthi at home and later they started meeting in secret. Their courtship lasted a little over two years and whenever I spoke to Nishanthi it seemed important to her to stress the fact that even though they had been introduced, their relationship had developed into a romantic one. At Nishanthi's wedding when she was going from table to table greeting the guests as is the custom, she spent a considerable amount of time giggling with her friends who were at the same table as I. When I asked one of them what had

happened, one of them told me, *"Nishanthi is worried about the honeymoon."* When I asked why, she replied, *"Nishanthi is worried that the mother-in-law may come with the white cloth and she would have nothing to show!"* Another friend interjected to say, *"Looks like they have had a dress rehearsal!"* Everyone collapsed in a fit of giggles. I had heard the term 'dress-rehearsal' a few times to know that it meant that the couple had either engaged in sexual intercourse or experimented with penetrative sex. What was significant was that it was important to Nishanthi to indicate this fact to her friends. *"Being worried about the honeymoon"* was a rhetorical device that Nishanthi used to declare to her friends that hers was not an arranged marriage and that Gayan and she shared an emotional bond that had led to sexual intimacy before marriage. In invoking the signs of a self-choice marriage Nishanthi, I believe, was presenting herself as modern and progressive.

2.2 Being 'Modern'

Hirsch (2003), commenting on migrant Mexican families in the US, observes that a characteristic of asserting a modern identity was comparing yourself with your parents and declaring your intimate relationships as being different from a more traditional past. She argues that young people's assertions about difference implied that their intimate relationships were better than their parents—"freer from constraint, more pleasurable and satisfying, perhaps even in some ways more prestigious" (p.13). Within the Sinhala-Buddhist middle-class families in Sri Lanka, self-choice marriages were presented by the younger generation I I interviewed as being better than traditional arranged marriages. However, assertions of being modern and progressive did not always accompany a comparison with the previous generation. Amongst the urban middle-class families in Sri Lanka self-choice had become the norm, rather than the exception. While on the one hand the younger generation had taken it for granted that they would choose their future spouses, the respondents from the older generation, on the other hand, seemed to have concurred with this assumption. In fact, parents rarely presented their children's choices as disregarding or explicitly defying their wishes. I believe there was a general expectation that the younger generation would choose their partner, and parents would intervene to arrange a

marriage only in extenuating circumstances, namely when people had passed their marriageable age or when they are living abroad and a suitable person could not be found from the communities they lived in. I argue that the 'choosing person' was a mark of modernity and progress defining not only the person making the choice, but the families that allowed its members to make that choice.

As mentioned in chapter three the growing tolerance of self-choice marriages was partly due to historical timing. By the middle of the twentieth century, as a result of the changing socio-economic milieu of post-independent Sri Lanka, many women were finding their future partners within the new spaces that were opening up for young people to interact with each other such as schools, universities, urban neighbourhoods, and workplaces. These new spaces were also giving rise to novel forms of sociality outside of people's kinship networks. While friendships formed in these spaces, most often with the same sex, nevertheless they opened up opportunities for young women to be introduced to potential suitors in the form of brothers and cousins. These romantic relationships were initiated often through messages sent through friends and thereafter through letters. The life histories of the older generation revealed that there was at least one member of the family, often more than one, who got married after they had initiated a romantic relationship. Many of these relationships were accommodated by families and celebrated with a ceremonial wedding.

Subhashini (30) belonged to the same family whose history I presented at the beginning of chapter four. She was Nāmali's first cousin. Her mother, Gunavatī's younger sister, had met her husband while at university and had married him after obtaining her parents' consent. Here Subhashini talks about how, despite pressure from relatives and friends to consent to an arranged marriage, there was a tacit understanding that Subhashini would choose her own partner.

> *Until I did my A-level [exams] my parents had not talked to me about marriage at all. Not directly. My parents started receiving proposals [of marriage] when I went to university. Whenever my mother mentioned one to me, I kept saying 'no.' And they did not pressure me at all. [My parents] expected me to get friendly. They never tried to*

> *find someone for me. My aunt had suggested to my mother about publishing [a marriage classified] in the paper. My mother had said, 'are you mad!' She told her that [my father] would not like it at all. And even I had been saying from my younger days 'who gets married through proposals these days!'*

Just as Subhashini's claim to modernity was asserted through her refusal of an arranged marriage, Nāmali and her husband Sampath asserted their progressiveness by talking about the marriage that had been arranged for Nāmali's brother, who was thirty-five and lived in Germany, in a slightly contemptuous tone. Sampath described his *"observations"* of arranging a marriage as "*the same thing as what took place in my parents' time; nothing has changed,"* implying that it was old-fashioned. He described the relationship between the couple, who had been communicating via phone calls before they eventually met, as *"odd because they have been having a relationship on the phone, [there was] nothing physical. So when they met, it was weird."* Even though the early years of Sampath's and Nāmali's courtship was conducted mainly on the phone, here Sampath seems to be suggesting that agreeing to a marriage without any physical contact was not normal. Later, Sampath reflected on why his brother-in-law was unmarried by saying, *"he is the only person in the family who is not involved with someone. [It is] because he is very shy."* In fact, being *"shy"* or *"not social"*—meaning 'unsociable'—was cited by several people as the reason why someone was unmarried compelling families to intervene with an arranged marriage. On the other hand, being 'social' was often mentioned as a positive and valued character trait that marked someone as special.

It is significant that when I asked Gunavatī about what expectations she had for her children's marriages, she responded by talking about Nāmali's self-choice marriage instead of describing the marriage she was arranging for her son. When I asked Gunavatī whether she had talked to Nāmali about an arranged marriage, she responded with surprise: "*No! Actually, I didn't think like that at all[…] When she was about sixteen I had told her it's OK to get friendly. It has to be a Sinhala-Buddhist person though. And someone with good qualities."* Her tone indicated to me that her description of Nāmali's personality as *"outgoing"* and *"outspoken"* was not the only

reason for her surprise. Later when I asked Gunavatī about her son she unhesitatingly described in detail the process she had followed to find a suitable partner for him, laughing sometimes at what seemed like his idiosyncrasies.

> *The girl has to be willing to migrate. That's the main criteria […] He also wanted them to have long hair, longer than shoulder length[…] So when I called, I asked them, 'how long is your hair?' What to do!*

However, Gunavatī seemed to want to justify why she had to arrange a marriage for her son. *"The Sri Lankans [in Germany] are mainly, you know […]people who have gone to earn. My son is an accountant."* Here Gunavatī is implying that a majority of the Sri Lankan migrant workers in Germany are engaged in low-skilled work and, therefore, unsuitable for her son who is a professional. Moreover, she described him as being *"very religious,"* implying perhaps that he was reserved and reluctant to initiate a romantic relationship and, therefore, had been unable to find someone before he left for Germany.

It was also important for the women I spoke with to present their freedom to choose as having parental sanction and that, in fact, parents respected their choices because they trusted them to make the right ones. Darshini (52) came from a Sinhala-speaking middle-class family residing in Colombo. She had met her husband at her workplace in the city. When I asked whether her parents had thought of arranging a marriage for her, Darshini interjected with a vehement *"no, no. They did not insist on [an arranged marriage]. They had told me 'look, we have taught you the good and the bad, so we will accept whomever you like.'"* Her assertion was corroborated by other members of her family who did not refer to any opposition to the marriage even though Darshini moved to her husband's hometown in the South after marriage—a somewhat unusual occurrence given that the trend at that time was to move to the city. Darshini also asserted that she and her husband took it for granted that their daughter would choose her own marriage partner.

> *No, we hadn't told her anything [about arranging a marriage]. We only told her you should marry a good person. Actually we had told her to get friendly with a Sinhala-Buddhist […]but when we sent her to Australia for her studies […]this boy had asked her[…][…] His whole family lives there[…] Our relatives [in Australia] all told us they are a*

> *good family, so we didn't go to look into the matter further[…] He is Sinhalese, but a Christian. That's the only issue really.*

Just as Darshini asserted that her parents respected her choice, Darshini is keen to emphasize that she respected her daughter's choice of partner even though he did not meet all of their basic criteria. Darshini is also keen to highlight that her daughter had made a good choice because the groom came from a "good family," meaning that his class background superseded other traditional criteria like religion, ethnicity, and caste, which I discuss in depth in the next chapter.

2.3 Agency as Compliance and Defiance

In talking about marital histories I noticed that participants invariably drew contrasts between the past and present or how things were then (*issara kālē / ē kale*) and how things are now (*dæn kālē*). Grossberg (1996), commenting on the construction of modern identities, asserts that the trope of modern identity is encapsulated in the way it is "constituted out of difference" and contrasted with the past (p.93). How participants acted was central to these comparisons and the difference in behaviour was implicitly framed in terms of agency. Making choices with regards to marriage and the attending decisions with regards to residence patterns, reproductive timing, and lifestyle were presented as modern phenomena and not part of the older generations' repertoire of practices. There were two types of contrasts that were drawn: one where parents distinguished their agency as being more limited than their children's more expansive choices; the other highlighted the importance young people place in presenting their agency as questioning and acting *against* parental expectations and social norms. In this section I will compare the narratives of the two generations to deconstruct the ways in which agency was concealed by the older generation who were keen to present themselves as complying with the collective, while the younger generation highlighted their agency to present themselves as defying convention.

The older generation were happy to talk about their childhood and how they got married, taking time to describe the various characters in their stories and describing events in detail. Within these narratives women often talked about themselves as

'unusual' or 'different' from the rest of the family in the way they were 'bright' students, or as 'thinking differently' from the rest, or as being more 'forward' than others. This was perhaps one way of explaining why they had had a self-choice marriage rather than an arranged one. However, women were usually vague about how romantic relationships progressed to marriage, leaving out the details about how they obtained their parents' approval. Their narratives gave the impression that events 'just happened' with very little intervention on their part. For example, Amaravatī (56) had met her husband while at university. She told me that her husband, who had been her Maths tutor in her first-year, had *"seen"* her and had come and *"spoken"* to her parents (*dækalā katāakaralā*). She describes the relationship not only in a passive voice, but also as if she had no part to play in the way events unfolded. "*He gave me some letters[…]One day he had gone home and spoken to my mother[…]When I went home, [my mother informed me that] a certain gentlemen had come and gone"* and had further asked her whether *"she know anything about it."* Amaravatī says she *"had no idea what had happened"* until her sisters had informed her that a suitor had come and asked permission to marry her. She remembers being *"surprised"* and reiterated to me that she *"had no idea he was going to come and ask."* Her family had eventually agreed to the marriage because he was a university lecturer and from a 'good' family background. Amaravatī's older sister remembers her mother being very angry once her sister's suitor had left; she recalls her muttering to herself about how her daughter *"who usually acted like a mouse"* had *"done things behind her back."* However she too stressed the fact that her parents had quickly gotten over their initial surprise and liked the match because he was educated.

Yamuna (65) and Nihal (68) for example had met at school in the 1950s. While Yamuna's family lived in a Southern coastal town, Nihal's family was from Kandy. He had, however, moved with his uncle who was appointed the principal of the school Yamuna attended for his last few years of schooling. Nihal had become friends with Yamuna's brothers and they would often stay after school as a group to play badminton. Neither Yamuna nor Nihal spoke about how they initiated the relationship. But Yamuna hinted at the risk she took in initiating a romantic relationship when she described her mother as being *"extremely strict […]we were all*

quite frightened of her." Yamuna's younger sister—Jayanthi—remembered being *"really scared for my sister […] what if my mother found out!"* However, neither Yamuna nor Nihal discussed the details of how they eventually informed their parents about their relationship. When I asked, Nihal asserted that *"because both [families] had the same background—upper middle-class. Both fathers were teachers […] there was nothing to oppose."* If there was opposition at first due to caste differences, neither of them even hinted at it. Yamuna downplayed their role in initiating and conducting their relationship without parental approval by claiming that their relationship *"was not like now. It was very innocent. You don't know the gravity of things. We just got to know each other. Something like that."* Even though both Yamuna and Nihal downplayed their agency and spoke as if parental approval happened as a matter of course in fact it was Nihal, not his parents, who had first visited Yamuna's parents to make his intentions of marrying Yamuna known to them. Yamuna later mentioned that her mother "*had been told about Nihal by someone at a wedding."* Immediately after that Nihal had come home and *"spoken"* to her parents. The fact that Nihal had come alone without his parents contravened the custom of the groom's parents' initiating the formal discussions about marriage even when a relationship already existed. However, Nihal's visit to declare that his intentions were honourable had been taken seriously because they later talked about how Nihal was given the guest room to stay in whenever he came to visit Yamuna after he had moved to Colombo for work. Nihal's initiative was perhaps partly prompted by the fact that his parents lived in Kandy and could not immediately travel to the southern township to meet Yamuna's parents.

Marie (81), talking about her experience sixty years earlier, said that she knew her relationship with Desmond would not be approved by her parents. While she came from an upper-caste English-educated wealthy Colombo family, Desmond's family had moved to Colombo only recently and was from a rural family without much education.

> *So my mother didn't like it[…]We used to do everything on the sly […]Sometimes I would tell my mother that we have a meeting in school […] and we would meet and go out for lunch.*

Marie, however, did not talk about any arguments or confrontations during which she insisted she marry Desmond. Instead Marie and Desmond decided to marry in secret through a legal registration; however, instead of eloping Marie continued to live with her parents rejecting every proposal of marriage that was presented to her until her patience was finally rewarded.

> *Marie: We didn't tell our parents so we, on the sly, with a friend of his and a friend of mine, we went to the Registrar's office and we got married. So we didn't tell our parents that we were married. After some time my mother tried all sorts of things to fix me with some one else, it didn't work. So at the end they gave in. Then we got married in the presence of others, we had a [traditional wedding] with the Registrar […] friends and relations were invited*
>
> *A: So, you got registered again?*
>
> *M: Yes, I have two marriage certificates! (laughs) But no one found out.*

In contrast young people not only asserted their agency in choosing their marriage partner, but often presented their choices as unique and defying expectations. Nāmali, contrasted herself with her mother: *I know my mother no […]she thinks in a totally different way. My thinking pattern and her thinking pattern are totally different.* Nāmali described herself as being *"independent"* unlike her older brother who had asked his parents to find him a suitable partner. When her mother eventually found out that she was in a relationship with Sampath, Nāmali describes the conversation in a combative tone. *"My mother asked me, 'what do you have with Sampath?' So I asked her, 'why, is Sampath not good enough?'"* Nāmali then remembers the confrontation she had with her grandmother who she believes spoke on behalf of the whole family when she had asked Nāmali about why she could not find someone from a better caste.

> *I got bloody pissed off. I told her: 'Ācci (Grandma), I will give you one year to find me someone better than Sampath in every way and I will marry him. When I say 'in every way', I mean not only should he be from a better caste; he should love me more than Sampath does; he should be more educated; he should have more money than Sampath, he should be better than Sampath in every way!' After that no one talked about caste*

Nāmali's cousin, Subhashini, also presented herself as an "unusual character" (*amutu kenek*), who made her point of view known to her parents.

> *My mother had told me not to get friendly until I went to university […]But during my A-Levels [marriage] proposals started coming. But I was saying 'no'. In general conversation I used to just say 'I'm not going to get married through a proposal.'*

When her mother eventually found out about Pahan, she had asked her to terminate the relationship because she felt he was not *"good enough"* for Subhashini. Subhashini recalls how she told her mother, *"OK, I'll stop if my father also tells me to stop."* Since at that time fathers rarely spoke to their children directly about difficult subjects like relationship matters, Subhashini realised it was the most effective way of getting her mother to stop disagreeing with her choice. Later, Subhashini talked about how she deflected her parents' anxieties about them having children.

> *Now that's it has been 2 years, my mother directly asked me '"aren't you going to have children?" I said, '"no, I am not'" Then she said '"Ah! What are you going to do in your old age then? As a girl, you are supposed to have children[…]The people in the village are constantly asking us 'your daughter—any children yet?'" This was going on for while […] So one day at dinner[…]in front of my mother and grandmother I said, "if anyone asks me about children again, I am going to say 'we don't do it—like, we don't have sex!'[…]My father did not say a word. He continued to eat.*

Even though it is clear people from both generations seemed to have had a say about their future spouses, it was the way people chose to talk about the exercise of these choices that was dramatically different. The older generation did not place emphasis on the self and rarely positioned themselves in conflict with their parents. Even when individual choices were made, people usually talked about these events as 'simply happening to them' without drawing attention to their agency. Their stories were often recounted in the passive tense without emphasising the role of the actors in the action. In contrast, young people used the first person voice emphatically. They talked about making choices for themselves, considering options, contemplating the various possible outcomes of one's actions, and also defying one's parents.

3 Agency as Responsibility

Although in the previous section my intention was to highlight the ways in which choice was a central trope through which people asserted individual agency, many of the quotations point to the prominence of parents and their expectations in people's lives. In this section I examine the context in which these narratives of agency are embedded. I argue that although individual agency is highlighted in the narratives of the younger generation, the person who emerges from these narratives is not an autonomous bounded individual, but a person deeply embedded in relationships—a relational self. By highlighting inter-generational conflict by talking about their choices in oppositional or contentious terms the younger generation are, in fact, drawing attention to the central role parents play in their lives especially with regards to marriage. Parental approval remains critical to young people's sense of security and belonging and also their overall wellbeing. In this section I will discuss the ways in which people regard agency not as a licence to do what they want, but rather as a responsibility they must fulfil. In negotiating between fulfilling personal desire and gaining parental approval people are also carefully weighing the consequences of their actions on their personal wellbeing which is enmeshed in family relationships. I argue, therefore, that people in Sri Lanka are ambivalent about agency and sometimes experience it not as freedom but as a burden.

The struggle to unravel individual desire from parental expectations is vividly captured in Chulani's narrative. Chulani (27), who I had quoted in the previous section as saying marriage was a 'personal' choice, regarded herself as *"radically different"* from her mother and also her cousins who had all married, either through informal arranged marriages or self-choice, and had children. During the first part of the interview it was clear that Chulani was vehemently opposed to her parents' arranging a marriage for her as she was on the upper threshold of the culturally acceptable marriageable age. Chulani shared with me her need to escape from what she saw as her parents' 'control' over her life as soon as she completed her secondary education.

> *I badly wanted to get out so I did my A/L's and I applied for a scholarship and I went to New Zealand. I would have gone to Kazakhstan if I had to at that time! As long as I got to get out of this*

> *set up and I got to go out and live on my own […]When I went to college it was as if there was a board saying 'meet boys!'*

Chulani came from a rather conservative Sinhala-Buddhist family whose social life was mostly centred on their extended family. Chulani talked about her experience in New Zealand as a time when she *"drank and partied"* without restriction. However, regardless of her desire to rebel, Chulani later talked about struggling between doing what she desired and managing the expectations of her parents.

> *The next relationship I had was when I was about twenty-five […]with an Indian guy […]In the end I let go of him because of the family. They never knew about it. My god! I would be hanged! […] I really wanted their backing as well. Now that I am a little bit older, I can realize and understand what this sense of belonging is. I mean I always feel that this family has played such a huge role in my life I don't want to trap them anymore.*[86] *I could have done it when I was 22—that was the rebellious phase […] Now I would really like for them to approve whoever you know.*

Chulani is acutely aware of her obligations to her parents and also her extended family and understands that her actions will have repercussions not only on her reputation and wellbeing but theirs as well. Therefore, Chulani is unable to do what she thinks she desires, which is to meet and like someone without parental intervention. However, despite her absolute contempt for arranged marriage, she eventually agrees to meet men who her parents wanted to introduce to her.

> *After this whole relationship ended with the Indian guy I was open to the arranged marriage thing, but I was like, 'here I am not going to invite this man in to my house I'll go meet him at a coffee shop or something like that'. But [my mother] was like 'No! That is not done that way', and I said 'too bad these are my conditions!'*

Chulani admitted that she "*wasn't against marriage*," rather that she was rebelling against the idea of an arranged marriage that she read as disregarding her agency as a choosing person. Throughout her narrative Chulani struggled to find ways to assert her agency even as she compromised on her parents' demands.

> *I have told them if I hear about [placing an advertisement in the papers] adios!*[87] *They get a bit scared when I say that […]because I*

[86] I believe Chulani uses the English word 'trap' to mean 'deceive.'

[87] Chulani was agreeable to her parents finding someone through their kin and friend networks. Later her cousin Dulani told me that Chulani's parents had, in fact, placed a marriage classified.

have the money to do it as well. But since of late I have become more open to that idea as well, but in my own terms. I will wear jeans and t-shirts I will not dress up […]I will not even serve tea for them; I will sit and wait. Thankfully the people I have seen so far have also been casual […] I can wrap my head around, you know, people coming over […]but I am not going to dress up and do all of that. So my parents have really compromised.

It is ironic that even though Chulani claims that her parents have compromised on her dressing casually for groom's visit, it is in fact Chulani who has compromised more in agreeing to an arranged marriage.

3.1 Secret Courtship

Unlike Chulani whose first two relationships did not end in marriage, a majority of the younger respondents, like Nāmali and Sampath, claimed they had married the person with whom they had had their first romantic relationship. Even though self-choice marriages were desired, this did not mean that people engaged in the Western practice of dating before finding the 'right person'. The 'right' choice had to be made at the outset even before committing to a formal courtship. As Mody (2008) observes in the case of couples in New Delhi, young people are not just pre-occupied with the 'indissolubility' of the marital bond, but also the 'indissolubility' of the pre-marital romantic relationship (p.11). Many romantic relationships like Nāmali and Sampath's were initiated in the last few years of school or just after people completed their secondary education usually between the ages of 16 and 19. Courtships were conducted in secret and lasted for at least 3-4 years before couples formally informed their parents of their intention to get married. Even in instances where romantic relationships had been initiated later, I did not meet anyone whose courtships did not span at least two years. Even though choice was emphasised in marriage, how younger participants made choices and arrived at decisions were often referred to in vague terms. Relationships seemed to be based on a tacit understanding and in most cased would eventually lead to marriage without a formal proposal. But the absence of explicit verbal communication did not mean that the 'choosing person' was not

engaged in considering, proposing, consenting, and rejecting. The long courtship period that usually preceded self-choice marriages in Sri Lanka is, I believe, critical to the decision-making process and is marked by individual agency. During this time people also made discreet inquiries through friends about their potential partner's background. Nāmali told me that *"I already knew a lot about [Sampath] because we were all in one clique […] When his family has an almsgiving, we used to all go to his house […] So I had met his mother."* Sampath had visited Nāmali's home as well with some of his friends and his sisters when they were involved in a social-services project. I believe young people undertook the initial background checks, like the formal checks undertaken by kin before conceding to a marriage, to ascertain whether the families were compatible.

Secret courtships were also critical for the younger participants to ascertain for themselves whether their initial 'feelings' would develop into a lasting emotional bond. Nāmali and Sampath's secret courtship, which lasted approximately six years before they informed their parents, was conducted mainly through the telephone during which time they "*[got] to know each other."* Subhashini (30) knew Pahan liked her because their school friends used to *"fool him about [her] […] from about grade six."* When they were around sixteen Pahan had borrowed her notebook at one of the tuition classes they attended together and returned it with a letter. Subhashini claimed that she never read the letter and returned it to Pahan unopened because she was *"frightened that her mother would find out."* The gesture of accepting a letter from a member of the opposite sex is usually considered a sign of interest and it seems Subhashini was being cautious about committing to Pahan at such an early age. Her mother had advised her about waiting until she went to university to 'get friendly'.

> *I was a bit afraid to start an affair because my mother had told me 'what if you go to university and find someone […]you wont be able to let go of him' […] Anyway, I didn't want to start anything while in school. I was scared. What if the teachers told my mother?*

Here, Subhashini is echoing her mother's anxieties about, on the one hand her fear of committing to someone who may not pursue his tertiary education thereby making the match incompatible and, on the other hand, compromising her reputation by

getting involved with someone she may later reject.[88] What is interesting is that even though Subhashini was reluctant to commit, she admitted that "*at around the same time Pahan and I used talk on the telephone. I used to study until midnight and then just call him […] We would speak until 4 or 5 in the morning."* When I asked her what they discussed during their all-night phone calls, she told me, *"We talked about everything. Gossip, what we ate, what we did the whole day."* Despite what seemed like an intense relationship, Subhashini was cautious about not labelling the relationship she had with Pahan as a romantic affair.

> *By the time I got selected to university […]it wasn't a 'sure' affair. It was just phone conversations […] I even made a 'pundit' speech before I left. I told him, 'look if I find someone good [at university], I am going to become friendly OK. Please don't think anything about it.'*

While Pahan pursued a professional degree in Colombo, Subhashini attended a university in the Sabaragamuwa Province. During this time, they kept in touch via phone and when Subhashini would come home fortnightly, Pahan would accompany Subhashini on the bus ride to her university which would last approximately 4-5 hours. Their secret courtship had spanned almost eight years. During this time Subhashini claimed that only two of her close friends and her cousin Nāmali knew about the relationship. It was only after Subhashini and Pahan completed their degrees that she formally informed her parents about her intention to marry Pahan.

The long courtship period seemed important to developing what Ranjan termed *"a good understanding between [each other]."* When Ranjan had to leave Colombo for his first job, Dulani and he had exchanged letters *"every week"* in which they *"wrote a lot about our families […] how we had been brought up."* It was through the exchange of intimate information about each other's lives that Ranjan came to *"know Dulani's character."* Later when there were other young women from Ranjan's workplace who were interested in him, Ranjan *"decided to continue with Dulani because I knew she was the best one for me."* Keeping it secret from family and even from the wider circle of friends provided a space in which young people could make decisions about their

[88] I will be discussing the importance of maintaining respectability in the next chapter.

partner without social sanction. Young people actively participated in secret courtships because it allowed them to get to know their partners and decide for themselves whether he/she was a suitable marriage partner. However, 'getting to know each other' was not radically different from the background checks parents would conduct before a marriage was approved. Just as parents were meticulous in ascertaining whether a marriage would be compatible in order to avoid social sanction if a marriage failed young people rarely made rash decisions because they were reluctant to face the consequences of parental disapproval.

3.2 'Wrong' Choices

While a majority of people claimed to have made the 'right' choice from the outset and married their first romantic partners with their parents' approval and blessings, this did not mean that there were none who got it 'wrong'. While I explore in depth the narratives of people who made choices they later regretted or unconventional life choices in chapter seven, here I will briefly discuss how wrong choices relate to the discussion on how participants experience agency as a responsibility towards others. Shalini (35) had eloped when she was twenty. She came from an upper-caste English speaking family with considerable social standing due to her father's successful career as a lawyer and her maternal grandfather's career in the diplomatic service. Shalini and Hemantha had met when they were sixteen and used to *"talk on the phone,"* but Shalini had *"not given him a word"* until he took the initiative to introduce himself to her parents at an extended family gathering after which he started visiting her. After their relationship became official, Shalini described Hemantha as *"acting very possessive. Only he could go out […]he put so many rules."* Her parents, however, did not allow Shalini to adhere to Hemantha's rules about attending family functions, which led to, it seems, some tension between Hemantha and Shalini's parents. Shalini's parents had also told Hemantha that he could marry Shalini *"only after he finished his engineering exams […] He was only twenty-two and that is not an age for a boy to get married. My parents said that to his parents as well."* While Shalini's and Hemantha's story is a fascinating one, what is important for the present discussion is how Shalini talked about the consequences of her elopement. Shalini's relationship

with her mother had always been deeply contentious; she described her mother as being *"very strict"* and as someone who "*scolded her about everything.*" When I asked her whether she eloped because of her difficult relationship with her mother, Shalini responded by saying, *"I may [have been] vulnerable at that time, [but] I won't say I am a fool. I knew exactly what I was doing."* Instead of blaming her mother Shalini took full responsibility for the elopement. Later, Shalini intimated that Hemantha's parents should have *"advised their son"* against asking Shalini to elope and dissuaded him by *"refusing to accept her in their home."* But she immediately followed this by saying *"I can't blame [Hemantha's] parents. If I had said 'no,' then he couldn't have done anything. So, I have to blame myself and Hemantha for what happened."* Shalini, I believe, is not asserting her agency here, but deeply regretting what she believes is an act of selfishness because she did not take into consideration the consequences of her actions on their respective families.

> *At that time you don't think of other people, it's only you, your happiness. You don't think of anyone else and you regret […] Up to now I don't regret [marrying Hemantha], but that particular way of doing things: not having a proper ceremony, no pōruva, no honeymoon. Certain things you realize after so many years, what I should have done. I had the opportunity, I was such a fool. There was no such reason for me to behave like that, no valid reason.*

While Shalini regretted not fulfilling her responsibilities as the only daughter and causing 'shame' to her parents, Sewwandi conceded to her 'wrong' choice of partner because she took her responsibilities as the only daughter seriously. Sewwandi was brought up by her mother and grandmother. Her mother had divorced her father when she was a baby on account of his being unfaithful to her. Her grandmother had supported her mother's decision and was also able to financially support them as Sewwandi's grandmother came from a propertied middle-class family. Sewwandi grew up in Kandy, which she characterised as "*very conservative compared to Colombo*." However, her mother was "*very open […] unlike [my friends'] parents."* Sewwandi's ability to choose the 'right' person is facilitated by her mother allowing the boy she was *"interested in"* to visit her at home even though Sewwandi was unsure whether the relationship would "work out."

> *People asked her why she allows me to hang around with this guy and what she said was, 'I just went and got married to this guy. I never knew him. It was an arranged marriage […] So I don't want her to make the same mistake.' She wanted me to find out about that person.*

Sewwandi described how after a year or so Ravin had started *"doing weird stuff […] he would pick on my friends […] He would disappear for days without calling me."* Perhaps because of the expectation that people usually married the person they had their first romantic relationship with, and also because Ravin had been coming home—a fact that was known to Sewwandi's extended family and friends—Sewwandi claims that she did not think of *"calling it off […][because she] thought [she] loved him."* However, after seeing *"how unhappy [she] was […] I used to cry practically every other day,"* her mother gives Sewwandi an ultimatum:

> *My mother said 'it is not going to work out because you're unhappy in this relationship […]' She was crying away, oh my god it was like drama! She said 'it is either me or him!' It was like end of her life […] She told me to decide between the two—'if it is him I will not have anything to do with you!'*

While Sewwandi had been given the freedom to choose, her mother intervened to reject her choice when she ascertained that Sewwandi's choice was detrimental to her wellbeing. Sewwandi conceded that in complying with her mother's wishes, she avoided making a wrong choice.

> *I don't regret the years that I spent getting to know him […] But I think Ammi made the right decision for me or I wouldn't have been able to do it on my own. Now I know the difference because now I am going out with this other guy […] Now I see the difference. Now I see how nice guys can be, but yes it was my mother who pushed me to end it.*

It is interesting how Sewwandi's mother's personal experience made her encourage her daughter to do the unconventional thing. Both Sewwandi and Shalini agreed that their parents' feelings and expectations had to be taken into consideration when choosing their marriage partners. While both sets of parents allowed their daughters to choose their partners these choices, however, could not be made autonomously. They had to be made within a relational context.

4 Managing the 'Risks' of Modern Marriage

As I have shown, individual agency incites anxiety in people who experience choosing the right person as a minefield of risks that must be navigated carefully. In this section I explore the ways in which people manage the risks associated with choice. Within the South Asian context arranged marriages are usually regarded by parents as less risky because it ensures that the couple is socially compatible even though the couple maybe unknown to each other; whereas young people regard love marriages as less risky because it is based on personal choice and individual compatibility. At one level this was in fact the common assumption held by my younger respondents. Self-choice marriages are less risky because the young couple have had the time to become known to each other through a period of courtship and also know what to expect from each other after marriage. At another level there is a sense of risk associated with self-choice marriages because it has very little of the old checks in place to ensure compatibility and durability. In an increasingly anonymous urban setting where family histories are not immediately known and can even remain unknown, marriage without the conventional checks of caste-compatibility and established kinship relations means people are no longer marrying the 'known', but the 'unknown', that is outsiders. I argue that these risks are managed in several ways. On the one hand young people resort to existing cultural resources like the matching of horoscopes and informal background checks, resulting in the reinterpretation of cultural practices. On the other hand, young people are also inventing 'tests' and 'checks' as a way of deciphering and protecting the moral character and respectability of their future spouses.

4.1 Reinterpreting Cultural Resources – Background Checks and Horoscopes

I have already discussed the practice of background checks that are conducted by parents prior to approving a marriage and how these checks were informally conducted by people from both the older and younger generations before they committed to a romantic relationship. Mody (2008) observes that even though social compatibility is emphasised in arranged marriages in contrast to individual

compatibility in love marriages, the love-marriage couples she spoke with in New Delhi in fact emphasized their social compatibility through similar educational and economic backgrounds rather than caste-compatibility. Mody asserts that defining social compatibility through such criteria illustrates, on the one hand, the importance of how secular categories like education, class, career prospects, and similar 'thinking' are gaining more importance in urban India. At the same time, Mody argues that it points to the persistence of ambivalence towards love as a basis for marriage (p.12). Amongst the urban middle-class in Sri Lanka the ambivalence towards love as the only basis for marriage is amply demonstrated in the way young people ensure social compatibility by conducting background checks on their partners' families and also by finding partners with a similar or better socio-economic background. When Nāmali, for example, makes the case for Sampath, she counteracts her family's concern with caste not only by claiming that their love supersedes caste-endogamy, but by listing Sampath's eligibility in terms of education and wealth—important markers of class: *"he should love me more than Sampath does; he should be more educated; he should have more money than Sampath, he should be better than Sampath in every way!"*

When Nāmali met Sampath he was part of a group of boys that were 'known' to her group of friends. One of her friends was the cousin of a boy in Sampath's group while another one of her friends was the neighbour of one of the boys. Due to these connections between the two groups, Nāmali was able to discreetly find out about Sampath without disclosing her interest in him. Moreover, as mentioned before, their friendship meant that they visited each other's homes, which further enabled Nāmali's ability to ascertain what kind of family and household he came from. A majority of young people found their partners through friends who had introduced them or from within their neighbourhoods. For example, Dulani *"knew everything about Ranjan"* because they were neighbours and she was friends with his sisters. When Shalini met Hemantha at a friend's birthday party, she proceeded to conduct a thorough background check and found out that Hemantha's family had several connections with people in her parents' network of friends and colleagues—a fact she announced to her parents when Hemantha started calling her. Shalini's spadework paid off when her

parents approved of their relationship. *"You can imagine [my mother] no […] she spoke to her friends […] That's how she invited him home."* I will discuss in detail the ways in which social compatibility in terms of caste and class structure people's choice in the next chapter. What I want to highlight here is how people manage the risks associated with choice by resorting to the cultural practice of background checks before they commit to a marriage that is seen to be primarily based on sentiment.

Astrology and Future Happiness

As discussed in the previous chapter on marriage practices, regardless of whether it was an arranged marriage or a self-choice one, the matching of horoscopes was a popular practice amongst the urban Sinhala-Buddhist middle-class, especially because in urban areas where there seemed to be a greater distance between families who are unrelated resulting in a greater number of unknown factors. In the case of self-choice marriages of my respondents, astrology seemed to have played an important role in helping them negotiate between parental expectations and individual desire. As discussed, the period of secret courtship is an extremely tense time for young people who have to decide whether the person they are tentatively involved with is who they will eventually marry. Once the decision is made, the next hurdle is getting permission from parents. One of the significant changes that have taken place in the last decade or so is that young people are visiting astrologers on their own to ascertain whether the horoscopes match. The visit serves multiple purposes that are sometimes at odds with each other. Nāmali, for example, recalled how her mother had been disapproving about her choice of a partner, especially since he was from a lower-caste group. When she found out, her mother had responded with a mild threat—*"we must check whether the horoscopes match—we have no idea if the two are compatible."* Nāmali had discussed the matter with Sampath and her cousin Subhashini. They had decided to take the two horoscopes to the family astrologer under a pseudonym saying "*let's find out if they match. If they don't we'll get it fixed. [Our parents] wouldn't know"* [89]

[89] "Fixing" a horoscope referred to getting the astrologer to alter the horoscopes in such a way that they matched. This would entail a rather complicated process because each set of parents had the original horoscope of their child. Therefore, depending on who was doing the checking, the bride's or the groom's or both horoscopes would have had to be altered to make sure they matched.

In this instance the astrologer had found the horoscopes *"suitable for marriage."* Nāmali responds to this prediction with a mixture of relief and defiance towards her mother. *"So after that I was like 'not only horoscopes, you can check whatever you like!' Now that I knew it matched, I didn't bother."* On the one hand Nāmali, like many other young people, was clear about not changing her minds about her choice of partner regardless of astrology. Therefore altering the horoscope was a matter of expediency and not a moral choice. What is significant is that although many participants talked about altering horoscopes, nobody claimed to have had the need to do it. On the other hand, unlike the arguments Nāmali made against caste considerations, she is reluctant to reject astrology as irrelevant to marriage. Unlike the modern egalitarian arguments young people used to counter their parents' concerns with caste and class, a similar 'rational' argument could not be made against astrology because many continued to believe in astrology. Therefore, in the case of Nāmali, she thought that her parents would have had a far more compelling argument against her choice if the horoscopes were incompatible.

Changes in urban middle-class marriage practices have also impacted on the role of the astrologer. In a context where arranged marriages are being negotiated with virtual strangers, the astrologer is expected to have experience and expertise in meticulously examining the horoscopes for any sign of incompatibility. At the same time, in the context of self-choice marriages where young people are approaching the astrologer on their own, the astrologer has begun to take on the role of a marriage counsellor. All the astrologers I spoke to accommodated self-choice marriages within their system of belief. They believed that two people could not be attracted to each other unless the *"horoscopes matched in some way."*[90] Mr. Chandrasoma explained 'attraction' (*kæmatta*) as intuition or

> *an innate habit that persisted through the karmic cycle" (sansāra purudda). When you meet your helpmate, there is a bond that forms[…] You feel attracted to the person you have known from a previous birth. Here, physical appearance, caste, wealth, career, religion, ethnicity—nothing matters. But parents look into all these things. That's because they want the best for their children.*

[90] One of them cited examples from Sinhala history where Kings had married lay women 'for love'.

Another astrologer—Mr. Rohana—explained that such a bond "*should not and could not be broken.*" At the same time, astrologers spoke about couples whose horoscopes indicated difficulties and challenges. In these instances the astrologers played the role of a counsellor and advised the couple on how to overcome their particular difficulties. For example, if the horoscope indicates that there would be no children, the couple was asked to seek help from a fertility clinic. In general, astrologers saw their role as preparing young couples to face challenges by advising them to "*develop their minds (manasa)[…]and hearts* (*hita*)" in order to face the future. By doing this Mr. Rohana believed that couples would be able "*to live their married life with more understanding* (*avabōdayen*)."

What is also significant is that while young people admitted to consulting an astrologer before they formally informed their parents about their choice of marriage partner, parents often dismissed the need for comparing horoscopes as being irrelevant to a self-choice marriage. For example, although Nāmali claimed that her mother subsequently checked their horoscopes to ensure they matched, her mother claimed she did not. Gunavatī told me that "*there was no point in checking […][my] daughter had already made up her mind. So I did not bother […] I was only interested in finding out the auspicious times for the wedding.*" There were a number of parents who echoed the same sentiments and claimed they did not ask the astrologer to check the horoscopes for compatibility once they knew their children were in serious relationships. However, given the preponderance of self-choice marriages and the increasing popularity of astrology among the urban middle-class, I am compelled to doubt the veracity of these statements. I believe parents continued to consult the astrologer, but the purpose and outcome of the visit had subtly changed. Astrologers claimed that parents were anxious about their children and consulted them to be reassured that the self-choice marriage will endure. The question is: how do astrologers know whether parents are consulting them about an arranged or self-choice marriage? Mr. Chandrasoma claimed that he *"intuitively [knew] from the way the parents spoke to [him]"* which type of case he was dealing with and he would provide the relevant service accordingly—either meticulous comparison or

reassurance. Mr. Rohana claimed that he would ask the parents directly, but this did not deter him from speaking the 'truth'. He usually advised parents just as he did the young couple about ways to overcome the challenges predicted in the horoscopes. Astrologers also claimed that some parents who were vehemently opposed to the match for socio-economic reasons sometimes tried to manipulate astrology to prevent a marriage. Parents would try to persuade the astrologer to elaborate on a minor incompatibility in order to build their case, but astrologers always acted from the position that "self-choice" marriages were compatible at some basic level. Parents often used astrology to control their children's choices: it provided them with reassurances when they consented to a marriage or gave them ammunition to oppose it when they did not.

Rules, Tests and Checks – Modern Surveillance

In addition to the cultural resources of background checks and horoscopes that people resort to in managing the risks of modern marriage, young men have also devised new ways of controlling women's mobility and protecting their moral character. Asela (28) had met his girlfriend while studying in India. He talked about how he *"observed her behaviour"* for a long time before he approached her. He found her to be *"innocent"* and *"kind."* In addition to his judgement of her character, he told me he wanted to *"test her"* to find out whether she trusted him. The test involved asking to borrow some money from her. When she agreed to lend him the money, Asela concluded that she did indeed trust him. From Asela's story I gathered that the 'test' was devised to find out whether she had any reservations about the class difference that existed between them because Asela came from a lower-middle-class background—his parents had taken out most of their savings and also had gotten into debt to send him to India for higher studies, while his girlfriend, on the other hand, came from a more economically comfortable background.

Throughout the interview, which lasted about two hours, I noticed that Asela received about five text messages on his phone. At some point he told me that they were all from his girlfriend who was still in India. *"Don't you know? She's checking in with me."*

Asela explained that she was *"keeping [him] informed about her movements"* and, in this instance, she had just come back to her boarding house after finishing her last class. Madhava (27) was also involved in a relationship with a girl he had met through a friend. I met Madhava after work one evening and the interview went on till about 7.30pm. During this time, Madhava too received several text messages from his girlfriend informing him of her whereabouts. When I commented on the number of messages they must be exchanging, Madhava laughed. He told me that she even sent him a text message after every meal to tell him what she ate. But mostly the text messages were about updating each other on their daily movements: going to office and coming back home and any other trips in between. When I asked both Asela and Madhava whether they had specifically requested their girlfriends to update them on their movements, they gave me almost identical answers: they had not, but their girlfriends knew they were *"very protective"* of them and, therefore, would send text messages to make sure their boyfriends "*did not worry"* about them. Their comments certainly sounded paternalistic and could be interpreted as the behaviour of possessive and controlling men. But I also observed they also sent text messages back. As Ruwanpura (2011) has noted, young university going women exchange text messages and 'ring-cuts' with their female friends as a way of keeping in touch and updating each other on their movements. In comparison, these constant messaging between a couple was a way of showing affection and concern for each other and a way of maintaining intimacy as much as it was a form of surveillance. In the cases of Asela and Madhava, because their girlfriends did not live in the same city as them, the text messages provided a way of maintaining intimacy. However, the term "checking in" was an indication that men exercised control over their partners' mobility. Both these women also lived in hostels away from the traditional mechanisms of surveillance and control. Therefore it is a possibility that young men stepped in to fill the gap by ensuring that these women continued to adhere to the middle-class ideals of respectability.

Another interesting feature of modern romances was the way in which young men imposed 'rules' on their girlfriends during courtship. This is even more significant given that parents talked about trusting their children and giving them freedom. In contrast

many young women mentioned that during the period of their secret courtship, young men would often restrict their movements, monitor their interactions, and regulate their dress. Dulani (35) recalls how she was prevented from learning ballroom dancing by Ranjan:

> *I can remember my [sister] went for ballroom dancing […]but Ranjan vehemently said no[…] I really wanted to learn. He could have gone with me as it was on a weekend. My mother [had] insisted that I should go and learn, but then Ranjan was saying not to go.*

Nirupa (32) described her husband as being *"very possessive"* of her when they were young. Even though her mother had wanted her to "*dress fashionably,"* Eshantha had never wanted her to wear "*sleeveless tops"* and *"short skirts."* 'Dressing charmly'– meaning in a simple and unostentatious manner, and 'being innocent' (*ahinsaka*) were two common ways men described women's demeanour.

These ways of controlling women suggest that men continued to wield power over women even as women claimed to be asserting their agency by making choices. As mentioned in the section on courtship, there was no accepted convention of men doing the asking and women acquiescing in self-choice relationships; rather it is a vague process through which choices were made by discerning mutuality of feelings as well as ascertaining social compatibility. However, once choices were made, men imposing rules was, I believe, a way of ensuring that women lived up to gendered norms and standards of morality. I also believe that these rules were more than about men imposing morality over women; they were also about managing their partners' public image. As mentioned earlier, many women from the younger generation confessed to having had sexual relations with their partners once they knew they were eventually going to get married. However, I believe it was important for young men to present their partners as complying with traditional gendered norms even though a self-choice marriage meant they had transgressed these boundaries.

5 Conclusion

In this chapter I argued that 'self-choice' was a more appropriate term than 'love' to describe the type of marriage being practiced by the Sinhala-Buddhist urban middle-

class in contemporary Sri Lanka. This was because my respondents stressed the importance of individual choice and personal preference over sentiment in selecting their marriage partners which they then contrasted with 'arranged' marriages facilitated by parents. I showed how self-choices marriages were portrayed as better than 'traditional' marriages because it was based on an emotional bond between two people who understood each other and had similar life-goals, and also because it was characterised by sexual intimacy and pleasure. Nevertheless, by analysing in detail the marriage histories of older and younger respondents, I showed that the emphasis on choice did not signal a significant transformation in marriage practices. Rather, 'choice' was a narrative device used to portray a 'modern' self. In fact, self-choice marriages were already being practiced in many urban middle-class families in the mid-twentieth century and, therefore, did not signal a radical departure from convention. Moreover, although young women used their ability to make individual choice as a way of presenting themselves as different and better than their parents, I also showed that choice in marriage was the expected norm because parents had invested in the idea of the 'choosing person' as way of presenting the family as modern.

Mody (2008), in her discussion of love-marriages in New Delhi, underscores the importance of bringing in the concept of accountability into discussions about people's agency. She argues that people's individual actions are always mediated through their accountability to groups. As I have shown, the respondents from the younger generation rarely made individual decisions with regards to marriage. Even though they were making personal choices, these choices were made within a relational context while taking into consideration the impact of their decisions on others. Although personal preference and individual choice is given credence in young people's narratives about choosing a marriage partner, the person who emerges from these narratives is a relational 'self' woven within a 'web of relatedness' (Parish 1994). In spite of inter-generational conflicts and tensions regarding choosing the right partner, parental approval remains critical to young people's sense of security and belonging and also to their overall wellbeing. At the same time, Sinhalese parents seem to accommodate their children's desires in order to protect familial relationships

and, I believe, for the sake of their own wellbeing and future security. Negotiations between the older and younger generations were not characterised by open conflict, but seemed to be carefully managed to ensure that the coherence and integrity of the family was ultimately maintained. Hence, in this chapter I argued that the younger respondents experienced agency in the context of marriage as a burden because it was a responsibility they were expected to take seriously. The 'freedom' to choose did not mean the licence to make mistakes, although many people did make 'wrong' choices. However, the possibility of making a wrong choice seemed to make people anxious because of its negative impact not only on the individual self, but on the wellbeing of others as well. Hence, although the young people I interviewed asserted agency as denoting their independence, they did not seem to experience making choices as necessarily liberating.

I finally examined some of the ways in which younger respondents seemed to manage their anxieties and fears about choosing 'right'. I showed how 'traditional' cultural resources like 'background checks' and astrology were reinterpreted by young people as way of being more certain that their choices would be approved by their parents. Furthermore, I showed how despite young women presenting themselves as experiencing more meaningful intimate relationships with their chosen partners, women's mobility and sexuality continued to be subject to surveillance by young men. I suggested that presenting their girlfriends as chaste and virtuous was perhaps how young men managed their anxieties about gaining approval for their choice of partner.

6 – The Structuring of Choice

Caste and Class Considerations in Marriage

1 Introduction

In the previous chapter I argued that within the urban middle-class in Sri Lanka there is a collective investment in the narrative of choice through which a 'choosing self' is consciously created. The family histories about changing marriage practices I related showed how narratives about individual choice have replaced deference to the collective in matters of marriage. I argued that rather than indicating a radical shift in the way people negotiated between individual desires and social norms, the emphasis on choice signals a shift in in the narrative devices used in the presentation of the self. In chapter one I had illustrated how these narratives are part of a historical process that emphasises an 'inner self' as integral to modern subjectivity and gives credence to individual agency in intimate relations. Rather than signalling freedom, however, my respondents' narratives showed how people often feel burdened with the responsibility of agency and grapple with making the 'right' choices.

In this chapter, by carefully deconstructing the anxieties that underline people's stories about choosing the right kind of partner, I show how marriage narratives reveal that choices are further structured by social norms and the expectations of family. I argue that marriage in contemporary Sri Lanka continues to be a principal strategy for social mobility and the assertion of status and discuss how caste and class considerations form the basis on which collective manoeuvring is undertaken to influence individual choices to this end. By describing a 'successful' marriage as a union between two people who are compatible—where 'compatibility' is defined in terms of education, career prospects, and lifestyle as well as in terms of the two families' similar socio-economic status—and by linking marriage to upholding family status and maintaining respectability, I demonstrate how caste and class have a profound influence over who people choose to marry and inform how families express and reproduce difference. In the previous chapter I also showed how people's assertion of a modern and

progressive 'individual self' is, in fact, embedded in a relational self. In this chapter I show how the assertion of modern norms and a belief in progress overlaid with a concern for kinship relations and tradition leads to contradictory ways of assessing people. Moreover, because what it means to be middle-class has to be always negotiated in the context of social mobility, instead of resolving the question of identity, people's narratives expose the perpetual striving that seems to characterise what it means to be modern.

2 The Privilege of 'Good' Birth – the Persistence of Caste as Difference

In this section I examine the ways in which caste status continues to play a role in marriage. I look at how people from both the older and younger generations explain caste differences, why they think caste is important in marriage, and the various ways people negotiate caste differences when choosing their marriage partner. I argue that caste continues to matter in the personal domain, specifically marriage and family, because people still continue to subscribe, perhaps unconsciously, to the idea of caste as embodiment—a sense that caste is 'written on the body' and integral to what constituted the core of a person. Both Bourdieu (1977) and Butler (1997) deconstruct 'embodiment' by referring to the body as historically constituted rather than 'natural.' Bourdieu (1977) argues the values and norms of a society shape people's disposition and prescribes the way the body is and acts through gestures, postures, styles of speech and so on. Butler (1997) argues that "gender is instituted through the stylisation of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self" (p.402). As I will show, caste distinction in Sri Lanka is often described in terms of habits and manners, decorum and demeanour. These dispositions are then interpreted as signifying an enduring self constituted by a person's family history. Hence, in matters of biological and social reproduction, in other words marriage, families could not risk failure by completely disregarding caste.

I also argue that caste continues to be asserted by the urban middle-class, especially the traditional elite and higher-caste groups, as a reaction to the influx of newer groups into the ranks of the middle-class. What Osella and Osella (2000a) describe for rural South India is applicable to urban Sri Lanka. Capitalism has dramatically transformed the landscape of status and hierarchy: it has enabled previously low-caste groups to shed their traditional caste-bound identities and establish their status within the middle-class through the accumulation of wealth, investment in education, and lavish weddings. In Sri Lanka, this has led to what Spencer (1990/1999) describes as "status-indeterminacy" (p.188). Moreover, 'merit wars' need to be fought on multiple fronts because competition for places at the 'top' is intense. Therefore, I argue that people struggle to hold on to their privileged positions by asserting traditional claims to prestige and status. Furthermore, at a time when opportunities for social mobility are open to many through access to education and employment, caste is a way of asserting a kind of difference and distinction that is irrefutable. The underlying argument that motivates these assertions, I believe, is that although wealth, education, and political power may have *displaced* the privilege of high birth, none of them could ever *replace* it. I argue that 'good' birth is not only a matter of *karmic* history—the history of a person's past lives, but is also about a person's past in this life where pedigree is a matter of *family* history.[91]

What Ryan (1953/2004) observed about caste and class relations in the early 1950s continues to persist even today. He noted that status gradients *within* a single caste are determined by the acquired positions of one's relatives in recent times where families may improve their status through wealth, politics, or profession. However, Ryan asserts that the status of a caste-group remained mostly immutable to material success as the idea of 'good' birth could not be modified by individual achievement. Even in the first decade of the twenty-first century it takes more than a generation or even two before a person's family history could be re-formulated or forgotten and a more stable position in the social hierarchy could be inhabited. And a 'good' marriage

[91] Despite the Buddha's teachings against a deterministic interpretation of *karma* (see footnote in Chapter three), some people of the older generation believe that 'good' birth is a consequence of one's *karma* (*cf.* Peiris 1956; pp.169-170).

was critical to consolidating status and achieving social mobility.

2.1 Caste and the Presentation of the 'Self'

From the outset it was clear that a person's caste (and class) status was important to how s/he presented the self. After the initial chit-chat, my first question to people was usually *"what do you remember about your childhood"* or *"could you tell me something about your family and how you grew up."* The older generation intimated their caste background by sharing specific details about their families, including their full family names with honorific titles obtained form the last Kandyan King or the colonial government, place of residence, and their family's status in the village. Sinhala family names, titles, village of origin, and a family's socio-economic status clearly indicated their caste group or at least that the family belonged to the 'good people'. As mentioned in chapter three, by sharing these details the older generation expected me to deduce their caste background. For example, Desmond (78), in response to my first question—*could you tell me about your family*, said, "*my father was Wijetunga* (here he gives me the longer family name) *from X village in Balangoda [...] my grandmother had first married a kōralle mahattayā.*" The father's name and the name of the village indicated that Desmond was from the high-caste *Goyigama* group from the highlands, while the reference to the title given by the King indicated that they were a family with some status in the village. The focus of Desmond's life history was about how he managed to overcome his rural (and also poor) family background to achieve middle-class status through education, a respected career, and a marriage to a woman from a 'good' family. Even though Desmond was remarkably candid about his family's lower socio-economic status following his father's move to Colombo, his assertion of 'high' birth indicates that caste was important to his sense of self. Later on in the interview he told me how his first benefactor, his father's Burgher boss, had told him *"son, you're a G caste (Goyigama) boy [...] you will do well in life."* [92] His reassurance seemed to be based on the notion that Desmond, regardless of his economic status,

[92] Burghers are descendants of the Portuguese and Dutch settlers in Sri Lanka and are considered to be a separate ethnic group in Sri Lanka. Prior to and in the early years of independence many Burgher families living in Colombo held important offices in the state bureaucracy. It is significant that a Burgher would refer to caste, indicating the important role caste played in the asserting status in the 1950s. Burghers were regarded as, and also placed themselves, outside the caste system.

will prosper because of his good birth. Moreover, he was probably also saying that Desmond's upbringing as a high-caste person will help him integrate into a society that was dominated by the high-caste groups.

Nayanthara (62), who was from a Kandyan *Goyigama* family, mentioned how she grew up in *"a large house, a very large house with plenty of space to play."* Later she described her father as someone who

> *did not work, he was propertied [...] When [he died] my mother was able to [manage] because of all the property [...] Even though some of it was claimed by our father's family, there was still enough.*

Later while talking about her marriage Nayanthara told me that *"the pōruva ceremony was according to the Kandyan customs because [my husband] is Kandyan [...] We are also Kandyans, but not so much like that (accarama nemē)."* Her emphasis of *"so much"* was a reference to her husband's elite Kandyan family background and her hypergamous marriage.

The younger generation, in contrast, were a lot more direct in their references to caste, but they were often made in a tone that suggested that caste was not central to their sense of self. Ranjan (36) responded to my question about family by saying:

> *Both my parents are Kandyans [...] I don't know if this is useful, but [my father's family] believe themselves to be elite. You must have heard about the caste system, so they believed that they belonged to [the] Radala [aristocracy] [...] My mother's background [...] she is from a remote village. I think they are one step below the Radalas, which are farmers […] Goyigamas.*

I believe Ranjan's use of *"believed themselves to be"* and "*I think they are"* was a way of indicating to me that caste was not central to his sense of self and that he had distanced himself from these classifications. Nayanthara's daughter Chulani (27) responded to my question about family by exclaiming:

> *Oh! God yes! It has been drilled in to us ever since we could talk and understand words. It is that bad [...] My mom was from that generation where it was so important [...] Last week I had a few friends over. So after they left she asked me "where is that person from? What is the surname?" And I am like, "I don't know you don't*

> *ask people like that." She's from that generation where they will ask the surname and figure out who they are. So that kind of identity has been drilled into us.*

Chulani's exaggerated response and somewhat derisive attitude towards her mother, I believe, was her way of distancing herself from caste considerations. But throughout the interview Chulani could not help referencing caste while describing her family. She described her mother's family as "land owning people" who "owned half the village" and who were "brought up in a huge house with servants." Her father, Chulani said, came from a "really good" family and she even mentioned the fact that her grandfather was a *"ratē mahattayā."* [93] Chulani, however, was clearly uncomfortable with the degree of emphasis her family gave to their high caste status. She described her family as being

> *So different than other people [...] I think they have been brought up with the sense of enormous pride and a little bit of hubris because they think that they should be held to a higher esteem than the others. They had that kind of mentality.*

Chulani's mother's pride in her Kandyan heritage was, however, considered an exception even within her own extended family. Her niece Dulani (34) described her as being *"a bit proud [...] not like my mother and my other aunts."* In contrast, a majority of the younger generation, even as they distanced themselves from their parents' caste considerations, were equally careful to emphasize that their parents did not instil these values in them. Neomal (42), for example, who came from a wealthy *Goyigama* family from the South, made it a point to mention that even though his grandparents were caste-conscious *"my parents never practiced those kinds of stuff [...] my parents were very open-minded [...] It was not even taught to us."* Ranjan told me that his knowledge of his elite background

> *Came from my grandparents not my mother and father [...] My parents came to Colombo and settled down even before their marriage. Although they had those values at the back of their minds maybe they didn't want to condition our minds to that type of thing*

[93] An administrative title bestowed by the colonial British colonial government on a member of the Kandyan elite of the highlands put in charge of governing a group of villages where they were already traditional chieftains.

[...] Because of that they didn't talk much about these family things. But in the village and in the society I heard these things.

Even though Ranjan's parents had not overtly imbibed in him pride in his high-caste status, he nevertheless learns about it by observing and listening to how people in the village addressed his grandparents as "*hānduruvō*"—a title reserved for the noblemen of the *Radala* families (Knox 1681/1989, p.200), and also by picking up on caste references that were made in conversations his parents' "nice group of friends" from "high" families had with each other. It is clear that both the older and younger generations struggled to present the self as 'modern' by distancing themselves from caste-based identities. However, because the 'self' was embedded within the collective, referring to one's family history was integral to the presentation of what was essentially a relational self. Moreover, as shown in the previous chapter, maintaining family status was regarded as a personal responsibility; therefore, referring to your family's caste status and social position was part of how the 'self' was presented.

2.2 Caste Endogamy – Negotiations, Denials, and Contradictions

I noticed that families originating from the Kandyan highlands asserted their caste-status more frequently than those from the South, and inter-caste marriages in the older generation were more common among families from the South than those from the Kandyan region. Among upper-caste Kandyan families, the *Radala* aristocracy continued to assert their elite status as did the Kandyan *Goyigama* families over their Southern counterparts. There were, however, many instances where marriages had been arranged between elite *Radala* and *Goyigama* families from the highlands, and also between Kandyan and Southern *Goyigama* families. As mentioned before, although Ranjan's father came from an elite *Radala* Kandyan family, his mother came from an 'ordinary' Kandyan Govigama background. Ranjan explained that their marriage had been arranged with careful consideration of the value of education over traditional claims to elitism. Ranjan recalls finding a letter written by his grandmother to his father explaining why he should consider a marriage to a university graduate as being better than one to a relative.

> *If I remember correctly [the letter] said something like (here Ranjan speaks in Sinhala): "Son, a BA-holder these days is a very valuable person. (Ranjan reverts to English). Although the family is not well-to-do, this girl seems to be good," she had said, and I think that would have been the influence.*

The principle reason for the letter, Ranjan explained, was because his father had been involved romantically with a cross-cousin who he could have, according to Kandyan custom, married without objection. However, his education and job as a trained teacher had prompted his migration to Colombo.[94] The fact that Ranjan's mother was also a teacher working in Colombo made her a better choice of partner. Compatibility in educational attainment and urban residence in this case was given precedence over family background thereby enabling social mobility for both parties.

Regardless of the practice of inter-caste marriages, what is interesting is that caste-endogamy continued to be preferred even in families that considered themselves 'modern' and 'progressive.' Neomal who had insisted that his parents were *"open minded"* about caste, nevertheless told me while talking about marriage, "*caste didn't play a major role, but I would still say, I'm also saying unconsciously, that my parents would have still thought about [caste] and they would have looked in to it."* Prashan (33) who described his family as *"English speaking"* and his father as a *"professional"* recounted a conversation with his mother soon after he had started working: *"One day, this is very hilarious, I asked her in humorous way 'what kind of a girl do you want me to marry?' And she said, 'any girl is fine as long as she's Sinhala, Buddhist, and Goyigama! (laughing*). Aditya (34), whose parents were from two different castes from the South, recalls how as a teenager he heard his mother and her relatives referring to people as "*apē ekkenek*," meaning "*our* people." *"I used to wonder what this meant [...] When they started looking [for a husband] for my sister, they started asking about the family, so I understood."* He later told me laughingly that now that his sister *"is still not married"* (she had reached her 30s), *"[his] parents had passed that stage [of looking at caste]".* Several people from the younger generation told me that once someone reaches their 30s, the status of being married took precedence over

[94] 'Trained teachers' were those were received a teacher's certificate from the State teacher training college. They were differentiated from 'Graduate teachers' who held a bachelor's or higher degree from a university.

other considerations. Roshini (32), in fact, told me that her mother, who was *"very worried"* about her thirty-five-year-old sister's single status, had once said in a moment of what Roshini described as *"madness,"* that "*anyone is OK, even if they divorce later."* As mentioned in the introductory chapter, being married in Sri Lanka is an important indication of status for both the individual and his/her family.

Elite and upper-caste *Goyigama* Kandyan families continued to assert their superior status over low-country Southerners even when inter-region marriages had taken place within these families. Dulani (34), Nayanthara's niece, told me that although her mother's family identified themselves as Kandyans, her maternal grandmother had been from the South. Dulani's mother Lalanie's marriage was arranged to a close relative from her mother's side who was also from the South. Regardless of the history of inter-regional marriage in her family, Dulani's mother preferred that they married Kandyans. *"From the very small days she used to say that we should get married to a person from the same caste and community. Uḍaraṭa (Kandyan) was not very important, but it would have been better."* Shalini's (35) father was from a Kandyan *Goyigama* family, but her mother's parents had had an inter-caste and inter-regional marriage.[95] Regardless of this history, to Shalini's exasperation her mother had insisted that she get married to a Kandyan *Goyigama*.

> "*This is what I don't like [...] My mother [...] she's mixed OK [...] What I don't like is Ammie (mother) doesn't like to show that she is [mixed]. I really get mad[...] I really don't mind saying what I am, what my family background is. I am not ashamed you know!*

Shalini's use of the term "shame" to describe how her mother tried to hide her mixed-caste heritage regardless of the fact that she came from a wealthy and educated family, provides insight into the importance of caste status to people's identities. The insistence on caste-endogamy and caste-superiority even when actual practices differed demonstrate the importance of an unblemished family pedigree. It was important that marriage alliances of the younger generation be strategically used for the sake of retaining elite status by consolidating rather than diluting the basis of these claims, especially in instances when family pedigree was thought to have been compromised.

[95] I discuss Shalini's family history in detail in chapter four. Her maternal grandfather was a Kandyan *Goyigama* while her grandmother was from the *Karāvē* caste from the south.

Shalini's exasperation with what she sees as her mother's contradictory values also reveals the difficulties people face when reconciling within themselves two different sets of values: egalitarian values in the public domain and caste integrity in the private domain. This inability to reconcile between egalitarian values introduced through education and democracy on the one hand and the notion of the immutability of 'good' birth on the other is clearly evident in the conversation I had with Chitranganie. Chitranganie (72) came from an elite Kandyan family, and throughout my conversation with her she simultaneously asserted her high-caste status even while dismissing it as unimportant.

> *We are from a better heritage. Our heritage is much higher. My mother is a Kandyan [and] like all the other Kandyans [...] they have their pure birth certificate [...] (Here she proceeds to describe her mother's family pedigree). The Kings gave those names [so they were] pure Kandyans [...] So my mother didn't want me to marry someone even as educated as the Wijethileke's coming out of the Colombo University. They wanted to check the pedigree, compare the families.*

Here, Chitranganie is weighing the merit of a "better" and "pure" family pedigree against the value of education. Almost immediately she dismisses the importance of the former in favour of the latter while asserting the principle of equality:

> *I don't want to feel so glamorous about our family about our caste and creed and all. I lead a very down-to-earth life. Because all human begins are alike I don't want to draw a line—"we are Kandyans [...] we are up-country they are low country this and that." If you're educated and if you can live together and lead a good life that is all [that matters].*
>
> *A: So, you think caste doesn't really matter in marriage aunty?*
>
> *C: What rubbish! (Here she exclaims in Sinhala—anē mona boruda!)*

Throughout my field work I witnessed first-hand people's conflicted relationship to caste. Even though the older generation made references to caste, they were often visibly uncomfortable when I pursued the subject further. When I asked Menikē (84) to describe her oldest sister's "grand" wedding, she started saying: *"in those days there were people who came to cook and they had to come through the back door."* Menike suddenly paused here and continued in a whisper: *"it's not good to talk* [...] *those*

things mattered in the village in the past [...] it is a sin to talk about people like that." After that she reluctantly answered my questions about caste-relations reiterating that she was talking about it *"only because [it would] help with my studies."* The older generation tended to lower their voices when I broached the subject and sometimes spoke in code referring to "G caste" and "K caste" meaning *Goyigama* and *Karāwe*, and also saying '*Padu*' (lowest caste category) in a barely discernible whisper. Lalanie (65), Nayanthara's older sister and Dulani's mother, suddenly stopped explaining her Kandyan *Goyigama* family's tendency to discriminate even low-country *Goyigama* families, to *say "if [my daughter] knows I am talking about these things, she will be so upset."* Like Lalanie, a number of people belonging to the older generation would suddenly interject a discussion about caste by saying how their sons or daughters would be "shocked" if they heard them speak about caste so openly indicating that caste was clearly a private matter and considered taboo for public discussion. It was also an interesting insight into the back and forth policing of behaviour between generations. Many of them told me that caste only mattered in marriage "*you know [...] because [...]*" and I was left to interpret why from their often incomplete sentences and vague explanations.

Why Caste Matters in Marriage – Compatibility and Values

In this section I discuss how people explained why caste still mattered in marriage. Lalanie (65), like her younger sister Nayanthara, was clearly proud of her Kandyan *Goyigama* family heritage. Unlike Nayanthara who had married into an elite Kandyan family, Lalanie had had an arranged marriage to a relative from her mother's side who were Southerners. Although Lalanie talked about her late-husband very affectionately, it was clear that the marriage had compromised not only her desire for social mobility, but also those of her family. Here, Lalanie is trying to explain to me why she wanted her children to marry Kandyans.

> *Lalanie: My father may not have liked (my marriage) very much.*
>
> *A: Do you know why aunty?*

L: I don't know. We used to say certain things. No, what I mean is people used to say things (she pauses)

A: About low-country people?

L: Yes exactly but (she doesn't continue). Now our sisters, if someone in the village wore the sari the Indian way (she doesn't continue). I also had that a little. I used to wear (Indian) because of my husband. Now I don't [wear Indian][...] Even though (my husband) had connections [to my family], there is that thing. I don't know why.

Low country people are, I don't know how to say this, a little different. I don't understand why that is. [Our family] did not like them that much [...] If there wasn't anybody else, then we had to agree to a marriage [with them]. I am not sure why that is. Maybe it's the way we were brought up.

Lalanie's father had died when she was a child and her mother had died when she was in her teens. The marriage had been arranged by her older sister's husband who had made use of their kin networks to find Lalanie a suitable match. Even though Lalanie told me herself that her father and her husband's father had been *"good friends,"* Lalanie's claim that her father *"may have not liked it"* is perhaps a way of expressing her own view about the alliance. Women of the older generation often expressed their opinion, especially a dissenting point of view, by referencing someone else, most often their husbands or parents or family members older to them.[96] Here, Lalanie first references her father, then her sisters and family, and finally her upbringing in explaining why she asserted that marriage to a person from the Low-country was not the family's first choice. Marriage was the principal means through which families achieved social mobility and Lalanie's distancing herself from her Low-country connections was perhaps one way of ensuring that her daughters had the opportunity for hypergamous marriages.

As discussed in the background section about caste relations in Sri Lanka, people from the Kandyan highlands asserted superiority over people from the Southern lowlands as they considered their way of life as being more 'authentically Sinhala' due to their historical isolation unlike their Southern counterparts whose culture had been diluted

[96] South Asian women's indirect ways of speaking is discussed by Veena Das (2000).

by prolonged contact with outsiders. Here, Lalanie's discussion about dress reveals such an attitude. The Kandyan style of wearing the sari is considered the culturally authentic dress of the Sinhala people, whereas the 'Indian' style of draping the *sari* is thought to be, as the term suggests, not endemic to the Sinhalese. Southern women, however, wore 'Indian'—which was an indication of their having adopted 'foreign' dress and manners compared to the retention of 'authentic' dress and manners by the Kandyans.[97] Moreover, there is a general feeling that only Kandyans had the right to wear it, especially for the *pōruva* ceremony. During a wedding I was attending a younger woman at my table commented on the couple's attire—*"I didn't know [the families] were Kandyans"*—implying that they were not. A bridal dresser I had spoken to told me *"Kandyan, Indian—it is all fashion now, people are not thinking about the culture of these things."* For Lalanie, wearing 'Indian' because of who she married instead of 'Kandyan' sari clearly undermined her sense of identity. Unlike her sister Nayanthara who had assimilated her husband's elite Kandyan identity into her sense of self, Lalanie distanced herself from her Low-country connections by reverting to wearing the Kandyan *sari* after her husband's death—another indication of how caste was a matter of embodiment.

Many of my informants, like Lalanie, used the term *"venas,"* meaning 'different,' to explain why caste integrity was important to marriage. As discussed in chapter four, compatibility was seen as the bedrock of a successful marriage where a similar family background was the core element. The term 'different' was often used to suggest incompatibility. It was, however, often unclear what people actually meant by that term. For the older generation it seems caste constituted irrefutable difference, a difference that was hard to describe, but certainly mattered in marriage. Suhashini (30), whose family was elite Kandyan, had directly questioned her father about caste. *"Once I asked my father straight off about it: 'why is it that the caste is such a big issue?' And he said, 'well, there are certain people that you can mingle with and certain people that you can't."* Shalini remembers how her mother had discouraged a teenage romance after she found out that the boy was from a different caste by saying *"they are not our calibre of people."* These explanations suggest a preoccupation with

[97] Sri Lankan Tamils also drape the sari 'Indian' style.

pedigree and the retention of status and ultimately caste as embodiment that marriage to a different caste would compromise. Chitranganie, who had dismissed caste considerations as 'rubbish' conceded that caste mattered when living together. In a reflective moment she told me:

> *There [is a] sort of value in a caste you know. Now people that you call low- caste, their mode of life [is] very different from ours [...] When you live with them you can see the way they talk, their ideas, the way they are[...] I feel that. But you can't take the educated crowd [...] they think the same way, but when you come to live with the families you can see (She does not continue).*

According to Chitranganie, and many others, compatibility meant similarity in lifestyles and manners, and also values and morals. Education, according to Chitranganie, mitigates some of the differences, but even education could not change people's lifestyle. Chitranganie seems to be reflecting Bourdieu's theory of habitus in her analysis of caste distinction. Bourdieu (1984) posits that social class determines a person's tastes and preferences, and shows how distinctions based on social class get reinforced in people's habits and lifestyle. He argues that the weight of social origin increases as people move away from the legitimate areas of culture. In other words, people with education may acquire proper tastes in music and art, but their personal taste in clothing and food may still be heavily influenced by their social origin.

The importance of lifestyle and manners is demonstrated in Manel's story. Manel (66) came from a Southern *Goyigama* family and described her parents as "*simple village folk [...] but respectable.*" The children, including Manel, had been sent to Colombo for their education, where Manel was pursued by more urbane man from a Kandyan *Goyigama* family who her parents did not like. "*My father didn't like it [...] He used to tell me that he doesn't like the Kandyans, that they are a funny group."* Manel had thought *"these things didn't matter,"* but talked about how her husband continuously criticized her dress and lack of decorum.

> *One day my bra strap was not clean and he made a fuss about it and I said (here she speaks in Sinhala): "is that such a big thing for you!" (She reverts to English) I mean people fuss about real issues not these, but that was him. Sometimes when I go out with him he would ask (she speaks in Sinhala again): "did you look at yourself before you*

> *stepped out, you haven't worn your osariya properly. (She switches back to English). So he would find faults with things like that and he would say for a woman little things does matter (sic). [My mother-in-law) in my absence (here she is referring to a time when she went overseas for training) kept the house very neat just to show him that they were good people and that his wife is a slovenly woman.*

The inferiority of Southerners' compared to the superiority of the Kandyans, or the low-caste groups in contrast to the upper-castes, depending on the comparison being made, was mostly intimated in these references to lifestyle, manners, and decorum. In moments of crisis, however, difference translated to a matter of values and morals. This was driven home to me through a story Dulani told me about her husband Ranjan's family. Ranjan's parents had been considering two marriage proposals they had received for their youngest daughter. Both men were *"equally qualified"* and held *"good jobs in the private sector [...] The only difference was that one of them was [from an elite] Kandyan family and other guy was an ordinary Goyigama."* Preference was given to the young man from the elite background. However, during the marriage arrangements Ranjan's parents had found out that the young man's mother was actually from a *Karāvē* family. *"[My father-in-law] was shocked [...] but it was too late to do anything about it."* However, because the young man came from a family with high social standing, the marriage took place. A few years later the husband had suddenly decided to enter politics and quit his job to work in his village leaving his young family in Colombo.

> *"[My mother-in-law] was so angry. You know what she keeps saying? "That's what happens when the upbringing is wrong." She's basically blaming his mother for his behaviour [...] According to [my mother-in-law] his behaviour is an example of his mother's caste background!"*

Dulani went on to say that her mother-in-law made frequent references to her son-in-law's upbringing whenever she felt angry about what she judged as his misplaced priorities and negligence of his family. Dulani's story illustrates how caste was fundamentally a matter of values that could not be learned but was embodied. What is being implied here is that the mother by virtue of being lower-caste did not know how to inculcate the 'right' values in her son simply because of her caste background; her sense of priorities and values were not just different from those of the *Goyigama*

caste, but were inferior. In other words, by virtue of being low-caste, she had compromised on her children's 'good' stock. The assertion being made here it seems is that neither a person's education nor his/her family status could override the consequences of what was seen as a low-caste heritage. As discussed in chapter four, it was thought to be common sense that a husband and wife should share similar values if the marriage is to be successful. Caste differences, then, undermined such good sense.

The status of women and the nature of gender-relations was also a way of expressing caste-based regional differences. Manel told me that her mother had warned her about how Kandyan women "*worshipped their men,"* referring to the Kandyan practice of greeting elders by prostrating on the floor and touching the feet with hands together. Manel had described her parents' relationship as "close"; therefore her mother's comment served as warning to Manel about the marital relationship being hierarchical if she married her Kandyan suitor. What is interesting is that women from the Highlands and the South both referred to the lower status of women when I asked them to explain what they meant by '*venas'* (different) in their reference to the 'other.' A few women from the South told me the Kandyan women *"treat their men like gods,"* while some women of Kandyan origin women mentioned how they had heard that mothers of Southern origin "*brought up their sons to think they are gods."* Conflicting values signalled incompatibility in marriage and parents used them to intimate to their children why differences matter in marriage.

2.3 Caste and the Structuring of Choice

I have discussed so far the older generation's view of caste and how they explained why caste mattered to marriage. In this section I discuss the attitudes and perceptions of the younger generation towards caste. I have already shown how the younger generation distanced themselves from their families when talking about caste in order to show that caste did not matter to their identity and sense of self even though it mattered to their parents, while others asserted that even though it had mattered to their parents, they did not overtly imbibe these values in their children. Despite these

verbal assertions, every single person of the younger generation had adhered, if not to caste-endogamy *per se*, at least to marrying within the groups that were considered the 'good' people. In explaining how they chose their spouse young people often referred to their parents' expectations thereby revealing importance of parental approval even in their 'choice' of marriage partners. During a casual conversation about caste with a group of young women who had had self-choice marriages, one young woman (32) told me how her parents, because her husband was a Buddhist and she a Catholic *Karāvē*, were "*happy he was a Ratwatte*," referring to his *Radala* caste, "*because [my mother] already had some explaining to do [to the extended family].*" Another woman (36) agreed by saying her parents were "*relieved he was Goyigama like them.*" During my interview with Thushari (37), she insisted that she did not care about caste, but complied with her mother's wishes who she said, had a *"method,"* meaning 'logic,' to why caste-endogamy was important:

> *I don't believe in any of this [...] Even my mother didn't have a problem with religion or caste or anything. She only cared about whether the boy was good—did he come from a good family background? Can he move around with us? [...] But she did say this to me: "even if your generation doesn't care about these things, what if the next generation does?" So, she didn't want my children to suffer if I married someone from a low-caste.*

Thushari uses her mother's 'logic' about the importance of an unblemished pedigree to the future generations to explain why she had to be aware of caste when choosing a husband.

There were also a number of instances where couples had to work to gain parental consent for an inter-caste marriage. Dulani and Ranjan (husband and wife) had both conveyed to me that caste did not matter to them even though it clearly mattered to their parents. Regardless, Dulani related to me how she and Ranjan carefully negotiated with Ranjan's family in obtaining approval for their marriage.

> *When he said that he said that [he liked me], I asked him (here she speaks in Sinhala), "will your parents like it?" (she reverts to English) because I was a little unsure [...] he's a proper Kandyan—his father and mother both were Kandyans unlike mine and he's the only son so they would have wanted to have a Kandyan girl. But he said (she speaks in Sinhala), "I can get their approval, I'll make sure of it."*

It is significant that even though Dulani described Ranjan as *"a little wilful"* and someone *"who usually had his own way at home,"* Ranjan's response was not to dismiss Dulani's concerns about his parents' approval, but to reassure her. Rather then asserting his 'choice,' Ranjan was clearly strategic in the way he gained approval.

> *[His mother] wanted her son to be happy [...] But I don't know if [his father] liked me at the very beginning because of the half-Kandyan thing [...] His grand-mother was alive, so [Ranjan] took me to see her. She was like (she speaks in Sinhala), "you studied at Visakha [Vidyālaya]? (She reverts to English). That was a plus point for her. Then she referred to some people from my mother's side. Then she was happy. Then only [his father] was OK and he accepted me.*

Ranjan knew that his father would concede if the grandmother approved. Therefore Ranjan made sure that she knew Dulani had attended a prestigious Buddhist girls' school in Colombo and came from a *Goyigama* family with connections.

Like Ranjan, the younger generation did not want to risk parental disapproval and preferred to exercise patience. When I met Sewwandi (30) she had been in a relationship with Shohan for almost five years. He was from a well-connected Kandyan *Goyigama* family and they could not get married because his father disapproved of her Southern background. Here Sewwandi talks about how both she and Shohan patiently worked at gaining approval.

> *[His father] basically wanted us to stop the relationship [...] He said, "my parents said this I guess we have to choose between the two [...] let's just be friends [...]" He is not a person who can hurt anyone so he kept on telling them, "How can you decide without even meeting her?" [...] I can remember he was reading up about the whole caste thing [...] he actually bought a book so that he can argue against his parents [...] I kind of knew what he was doing. He was trying to take time, give them some space, then introduce me [...]*
>
> *A: So, now they are OK with it?*
>
> *S: It was very gradual. I used to talk to his sister; [His sister, brother, and I] used to meet up once in a while. They also helped to convince them. His sister knew that he really liked me [and she] spoke to his father [...] After a while I used to bump in to his mother when I was going around with him [...] then I met his father [at a fair][...] Shohan introduced me casually to him, but they knew we were going-out right throughout. He never hid the fact that we were going out.*

Although Shohan's initial reaction to his parents' disapproval was to end the relationship, he later adapts different strategies to convince his parents by resorting to reason rather than passion. What is important to highlight here is the importance of maintaining family integrity to both generations. Sewwandi later told me that after his father's initial reaction, *"they really didn't pressure him too much because they did not want him to get upset. I think his parents did not want him getting mad. He is quite the determined type*." Ultimately, the young couple's patience was rewarded when Shohan's parents relented—Sewwandi got married a year after I interviewed her. Non-compliance would have meant a life of isolation sans the supportive structures of family and kinship for the young couple. It would have also meant that parents would risk their children's support in their old age as well as close relationships with future grandchildren. Neither the older nor the younger generation wanted to risk undermining family bonds through an open confrontation.

3 Class and Marriage

In this section I will show how class plays an integral role in informing the choices people make about marriage. Marriage, as I have asserted before, is a principal strategy for upward social mobility within the urban middle-class. Therefore class becomes a critical marker of distinction in marriage negotiations. Bourdieu's (1977) theory of practice, which emphasizes marriage *strategies* rather than *rules* in Algeria, is relevant to the discussion because it demonstrates how marriage is enmeshed within the processes of class reproduction. Bourdieu points out that,

> matrimonial strategies [...] [are] objectively directed towards the conservation or expansion of the material and symbolic capital jointly possessed by a more or less extended group [...] [and] belong to the system of reproduction strategies [...] through which individuals or groups tend to reproduce the relations of production [...] by striving to reproduce or improve their position in the social structure (p.70)

As I will illustrate, class differences are firmly entrenched in the social life of Sri Lankan and class references are embedded in everyday conversations about marriage and family. Amongst the urban middle-class in Sri Lanka families continuously negotiate

and compromise the consideration they give a person's family background in determining a suitable marriage partner for their children. The anxiety to get children into prestigious schools, the determination to teach English, the enrolment into a range of extra-curricular activities, the insistence on higher education, and attention to personal appearance all demonstrate, I believe, not merely an intuitive understanding of *habitus* or an unconscious reproduction of class, but a determination to improve one's position in the social structure.

I will also discuss the multiple ways in which people assert class distinction. The middle-class is usually described as a group that self-consciously positions its self in opposition to the working-classes on the one hand, and upper-classes on the other (Donner 2008; Liechty 2003). The characterisation of the middle-class in Sri Lanka is not significantly different: the middle-class is said to assert their identities as being different from the lower or working classes who are usually described by the middle-classes as 'uneducated' and 'ignorant', and also distinguish themselves from the more Westernized urban elite (*cf.* Amarasuriya 2010; De Alwis 1995, 1997). In this chapter I argue that the urban middle-class in Sri Lanka does not *only* position itself against the lower and upper classes; it is, in fact, only *one* of many positions the middle-class takes as it struggles to articulate its identity and place in the social order. I show that the urban middle-class in Sri Lanka is a heterogeneous group working assiduously not only at *differentiating* themselves from the poor and the rural communities and the urban upper-classes, but also at *distinguishing* themselves from each other within the ranks of middle-class.

3.1 Marriage and Upward Social Mobility

In Sri Lanka marriage is intrinsically tied to social mobility and this was evidenced in almost every conversation I had. Marie (82) while talking about parental expectations described her mother as *"an ambitious person [who] wanted [her daughters] to get married to people with had the same family background or even higher."* Keshini (54) explained how her maternal grandparents, who had migrated to Colombo from a rural coastal village and worked hard to educate their children, were *"shattered"* when their

eldest daughter who was *"good in her studies, good in English and [...] very good looking [...] married someone from a very low social economic background."* Swarna (65) described her marriage as *"unsuccessful"* from the very outset of the interview. During our conversation I gathered that Swarna's assessment was based on how she saw her life as having *"changed a lot,"* mainly in economic terms. She explained how she *"had grown up with many comforts"* and how she *"wasn't used to living with needs."* Swarna came from a wealthy Southern-Govigama family. Her husband—a man from an elite Kandyan family who had fallen on hard times economically—had initiated a romantic relationship with her when she was seventeen; her parents had agreed to the marriage because of the prior relationship. The couple's economic situation had worsened when her husband—a naval officer—was partially paralysed while the three children were still very young and became, according to Swarna, *"useless."* Swarna explained in a bitter tone of voice that her husband after not having worked for several years *"had to work as a security guard"* to make ends meet. Admitting to this was clearly shameful to Swarna because a security guard has a very low status in Sri Lanka. She explained that her eldest son had *"asked his father to give it up"* as soon as he started working. But even as Swarna was bitter in her assessment of her own marriage, she took great pains to describe each of her three children's marriages as successful and highlighted the social mobility that they had all achieved through marriage.

> *There were many shortcomings when we brought up our children, but that's not the case with [my children's] children. They buy them the best of clothes, the best shoes, everything. They go for swimming, they play the organ. The children live in luxury.*

Swarna described in great detail her daughter's hypergamous marriage to a wealthy, educated family with social connections. After quizzing me on whether I knew any of the eminent doctors who were relatives of her daughter's husband, Swarna explained to me why she thought her daughter did well in marriage.

> *He came with his aunt and uncle, the doctor I was talking about, and said "my parents won't disapprove aunty." My daughter is pretty. She is the kind of person who can be brought forward [...] She's not as educated as they are. But they liked her. That was a big thing.*

Swarna thought that the differences in the two families could be bridged because her daughter had the potential to be "brought forward"—referring perhaps to her daughter's ability to assimilate into a family with high status. Judging from Swarna's description of their life in Australia, her daughter had indeed achieved this by focusing on her children's education and *"keeping a beautiful home,"* which Swarna had *"taught her from a very young age."*

Social mobility was important to the younger generation as well. Nāmali (30) for example had challenged her family's disapproval of her choice of partner based on caste difference by itemising the number of ways Sampath qualified in terms of class. She had challenged her grandmother to find her someone who "*had was more educated than Sampath, who had more money than Sampath. He had to have all these things, not just caste!"* Roshini (32) explains what she looked for her in a future partner by referring to social mobility in terms of not just education but being intellectual.

> *I always wanted someone who is intellectually superior [...] I don't think I would have been comfortable with someone who couldn't challenge me or do better than me. So I am very happy with Ashan because Ashan ticked all those boxes.*

Despite the fact that Ashan was a Christian, which Roshini admitted would *"complicate things when children came along,"* she emphasized their compatibility in terms of a shared love for reading and similar tastes in theatre and music.

When Social Mobility Fails

The importance of achieving social mobility through marriage was demonstrated in the way mothers like Swarna spoke about their daughters' marriages by cataloguing the credentials of their sons-in-law and their extended families. Parents and family, however, were sometimes disappointed when marriage did not meet the expectations of progress even if their daughter's choice of partner was someone they knew and liked on a personal level. Subhashini (30) explained to me why her family was at first reluctant to approve of Pahan who she had known from childhood: *"I guess it was*

because he was from the same township. His mother was also a teacher [...] They both had Government jobs. When I asked [my mother] why she didn't like Pahan, she said "it's because we are too close." The phrase "too close" referred to the fact that Pahan's family was from the same area. Subhashini explained that her mother was worried that the villagers would know that the young couple had initiated the marriage rather than the parents. Even though self-choice marriages were accepted amongst the urban middle-class, Subhashini's mother did not want the village folk, who were regarded as not as progressive, to gossip about her daughter's moral character. The reason the villagers would surmise this is what's important to highlight here. Given Subhashini's family's status in the village— they had lived overseas, her father had been the first to own a vehicle, and he was the head of a prestigious state educational institution—it would have been obvious that they would not seek a marriage alliance with an 'ordinary' family like Pahan's. Moreover, Subhashini had a university degree, worked for a reputed non-governmental organization, and was described as *"fair, tall, and pretty"* by her family—important criteria for a hypergamous marriage. Subhashini explained that Pahan was well liked by her family, but her family's ambitions for her prevented them from approving the match immediately. "*They liked [Pahan], everybody liked him, even my mother liked him as a person. There was nothing wrong with Pahan [...] I don't know, maybe they had higher hopes for me."* Subsequently, Subhashini became more explicit in her analysis of her family's reluctance:

> *It was the same status (she uses the English term here). They were in the same place; it was not like they were wealthy [...] [My family] expected their daughters to marry into an important family. In fact my aunt had said "if we had arranged a marriage for her, we could have found someone from a far better place."*

Pahan too was aware that he would not be accepted by Subhashini's family and told me how his mother often told him to *"prepare himself [for an eventual] rejection."* Education was the only path open to him and he worked hard to prove himself worthy of Subhashini by excelling in his studies and later in his career.

> *I graduated from X institution with every possible certificate I could get [...] I did my studies very well because I wanted to make sure I made a good impression on [Subhashini's] father [...] Then I took on a project at the same place and I worked with one of the highest*

> *officials in the Government sector [...] who had told [the father] how good I was [...] Then I left and became independent.*

It is interesting how Pahan uses his professional qualifications to meet his personal ends. Pahan's strategy seemed to have worked because when they had finally revealed to Subhashini's parents about their relationship, *"even though her mother didn't like me at first, her father recommended me because he knew [about] me."*

What is significant is how Subhashini's family acts *after* Pahan and she have successfully negotiated parental consent. Her parents concede to their decision to legally register their marriage almost a year before their wedding in order to enable the couple to obtain a joint housing loan. Once the loan is approved, her father gifts her the shortfall so that they would be able to buy an already built house in Colombo rather than purchasing land on which they would build once they had more savings. Subhashini told me that her father did not want her to *"start from the beginning [...] so he gave us the money."* Subhashini's unmarried aunt who lived in Germany furnished the entire house as a wedding gift. Subhashini's story illustrates how when social mobility is not achieved through marriage, family steps in, when possible, to ensure that their daughters maintain their standard of living and lifestyle prior to marriage.[98]

Like Subhashini's family, there were other instances where parents intervened not merely to compensate materially, but to bolster a man's weaker social position. In the two stories I recount here, education was the principal means through which socio-economic differences were sought to be bridged and how families tried to "save face." Jalani (53) came from an English-educated middle-class family with political connections. When her parents found out that she was involved in a romantic relationship with *"just an audit clerk"* they had opposed it due to the differences in the family background.

> *My father never liked his family [...] not because they were Catholic—that was not a problem—but because they were not educated. You know his father was a businessman but was a failure [...] [he] was in debt. They had a house in Moratuwa one time [...] but they had*

[98] This is similar to the modern-day dowry dynamics in Bangladesh where the bride's dowry is used to uplift the groom's status (White 2010).

> *played out the money [...] So my father didn't like that family because [my father] couldn't relate to this family.*

On a whim Jalani *"runs away"* to his house following an argument with her mother about not wanting to pursue her tertiary education in Russia, which her parents had arranged for her through their political connections. Jalani recalls how her mother *"pleaded with [her] to come back home"* and she agreed only after her mother conceded to her *"conditions,"* which was to *"allow [her] boyfriend to come home."* Because the marriage was regarded as an eventuality, Jalani's parents worked towards ensuring not only that their daughter would attend university, but also their future son-in-law.

> *[My mother] was a manipulator, she somehow got around him and told him that if I leave for Moscow that he will also be sent [to university]. So that was a big thing for him because he was just an audit clerk [...] so that is how she got me to go [to university][...] (Laughing) [...] And he became a famous company director, thanks to her.*

By offering to secure a scholarship for him to study overseas Jalani's parents managed to protect their family's status.

Roshanthi's (36) story is similar. Her parents came from an English-speaking upper-middle-class family. Her parents were both professional and valued higher education. When it was time for Roshanthi to apply to universities in the UK, she had confessed to having a boyfriend who she did not want be apart from. Roshanthi intimated to me that there were several differences in the two families' backgrounds, but it was only clearly articulated through the discrepancies in the two people's educational aspirations:

> *There was a mismatch there [...] [My parents] wanted me to do better. Maybe they wanted me to wait until I finish my university and find someone who is a professional [...] [Lakshan] doesn't believe in going ahead with further studies; what he says is "if you're good in something you should be able to go up whether he has a degree or not."*

Roshanthi's parents' strategy had been to prepare for the worst possible outcome—a marriage, even as they tried to dissuade her from getting married to Lakshan.

> *I was not that keen (to go the UK for higher studies) because he was here and I didn't want to leave Sri Lanka [...] but my parents talked to his parents and said that "Roshanthi is not going because of you blah, blah blah." So then his parents agreed to send him over for studies, but then my mother put a restriction saying that I shouldn't get married till I finish my PhD!*

Roshanthi's parents had partially funded Lakshan's first two years at a polytechnic in the hope that he would proceed to a regular university and earn at least a basic higher educational qualification. By insisting that Roshanthi earn a PhD before marriage, they were simultaneously hoping that the romance would fizzle out with time.

It is significant that when the desire for social mobility is not met through marriage, middle-class parents often step in to correct the perceived imbalances for several reasons: to ensure their daughters do not experience a downgrading of their standard of living; that men's social status is bolstered through education to 'save face', and, ultimately I would argue to protect the family's integrity, which, I believe, forms the core of what constitutes family honour among middle-class Sinhala people. Even as parents strive hard to manoeuvre their children's choices by deploying narratives about compatibility that stress the importance of caste and class, when children make undesirable or 'wrong' choices parents rarely oppose a marriage to a degree that compels a couple to elope. The importance of family integrity above all other considerations is what drives both the younger and older generations to negotiate until a compromise is reached. And it is this very same process that informs how people present their choices as always being the 'right' ones.

3.2 What is 'Class?'

In this section I delineate what constitutes class in Sri Lanka by exploring the ways in which my interlocutors articulated class in their conversations about marriage and family. As mentioned in the section on caste, in response to my initial questions about family and childhood, people who had no previous acquaintance with me often stated who they were by asserting their caste and class status. Neomal's response (43), for example, illustrates the number of different factors that form the composite category

that is ‘middle-class’:

> *My father was an army officer my mother was a house wife [...] They are from down south and go back many generations. [Both] my grandfathers, were civil servants and both of them were quite well known in the community. And my mother's parents’ house [...] is one of the biggest houses in the area and everybody used to come. I would say upper-lower- middle-class family*

Neomal’s introduction to his family establishes several important indicators of class: his father’s and grandfathers’ careers in the state bureaucracy indicates that they had completed if not their tertiary education, at least their secondary education; “well known” is often used to denote social standing; the large house indicates they came from a wealthy family and were probably the principal family in the village where “everybody used to come” possibly to seek patronage. Although caste is not mentioned explicitly, the assertion that his family history in a particular place goes back several generations establishes them as an ‘old’ family whose status was part of their heritage. It is interesting that Neomal says “upper-, lower-middle-class” in his categorization of his family. This indicates that he does not consider his family part of the ‘ordinary’ middle-class, but neither were they upper middle-class. Perhaps this is because his family was not one of the established families in Colombo who had migrated in the early 20th century to the city—Neomal had told me it was his father who had first moved to Colombo.

Among the middle-class in Sri Lanka, as in other South Asian societies, the accumulation of economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital takes place mainly through education, employment, migration, and marriage. For the urban middle-class, however, such a foundation has to be layered with other markers of social distinction, namely knowledge of English, location and style of residence, category of school attended, as well as lifestyle choices and consumption patterns in order to assert a distinctive place within the middle-class. Madhava’s (28) description of his girlfriend’s family highlights both the standard and more subtle markers of social distinction, wealth, social standing, and fluency in English

> *Her father has a shop in the town. Actually they are a rich family. Rich meaning they are into business, they had a vehicle. One of her*

> *uncles is a Provincial Council Minister I think. And she did languages [for her A-levels], so she is very fluent [in English].*

Education was one of the most important markers of class status and was often considered the single most important criterion for social mobility in Sri Lanka (Hettige and Salih 2010). Nāmali and Sampath, for example, who came from two different socio-economic backgrounds, stressed the importance their parents placed on education. Sampath who came from a wealthy family talked about how the value placed on education was what distinguished their family from other wealthy families.

> *[My father] a chartered accountant and my mother is a teacher. They are from an educated background [...] From the beginning they told me to do my education well [...] My father has a business which he got from his father, so we have that as well, but from the beginning they have told me to do the education. That background comes from the education level of my parents.*

Here Sampath stresses the value of education over family wealth as a mark of distinction. The fact that both he and Nāmali mentioned that one of Sampath's sisters as "*the one who was married to a professor in the US"* each time they referred to her indicated that education as well as a transnational career was an important symbol of their status.

Nāmali, on the other hand, talked about how, despite her parents' modest income, her father made sure she was educated.

> *We didn't have a vehicle at home so it was a low income salary range [...] [but] I studied at a private school [and] they had to spend on that [...] [My father] always wanted me to learn English and study well [...] Whatever he spent it would be on education [...] Because of him only I was able to do all this—to study in a private school, earn a degree.*

Education seemed to have achieved for Nāmali what her family aspired towards. She was a middle-level manager in a successful conglomerate and it is very likely that her private school education and her fluency in English helped her gain such a position.[99] Nāmali was more ambitious about her educational aspirations than Sampath—when I

[99] Amarasuriya (2010) argues that class plays a central role in how Sri Lankan youth experience discrimination and social exclusion, especially in the employment sector. The private sector was seen to give precedence to a shared cultural ideology over merit, and, therefore, family connections, school networks, and fluency in English were essential to gaining employment in private organizations.

met her she was studying for her MBA and her Chartered Institute of Marketing (CIM), and she also spoke English far more confidently than her husband. Education is perhaps what bridged the class gap between the two families and enabled Nāmali's hypergamous marriage to Sampath.

Wealth was in important marker of class and marrying into a wealthier family was an important indication that upward social mobility had been achieved. Nāmali (30) explained to me how her husband's family was different from hers mainly in terms of wealth and lifestyle.

> *My parents didn't come from a very rich background. Now when you look at his parents, [they] come from a rich background. Even when you go to do charity work my parents would give 500 bucks, these people will give 5000 bucks. They have money [...]My husband's parents have led a luxury life, not a high class [life], but he had a driver, he used to go to school by car and his mother, she's really good , took care of the children from A –Z she's the one who ran everything.*

The contrast Nāmali draws between his mother who she described as being *"really good"* because *"she took of the children A-Z"* with her own mother who had to work is a significant one. As discussed in the previous chapter, Nāmali's mother had to work for financial reasons; even when she gave up work, Nāmali intimated that her mother was not an *"outgoing"* person like her mother-in-law. Sriyawathie, in fact, had described herself as *"inexperienced"* and *"naïve"* given her mainly rural upbringing. Hence perhaps she did not possess the time or, later, the confidence to accompany Nāmali for the various extra-curricular activities she wanted to pursue in school. Nāmali interprets the "*things she missed [...] when she was a child"* as resulting from her family's economic status and her mother's class background.

While wealth was an important marker of class, what was more important was whether being wealthy was part of one's heritage or whether a family was considered nouveau riche. The contrast between respectable (*wædegat*) people and Mudalāli-types (local-level business people) was often used to capture this difference. The preference for professional families over business families also reflected such a

distinction. These contrasts were usually drawn by people who considered themselves to be part of the more established middle-class, meaning that the parents or grandparents had been members of, if not the Colombo middle-class, at least were eminent families in their place of origin. Dulani (34) explained to me that a particular proposal of marriage her mother had received had been rejected by their uncle, a doctor, because he had found out that despite the intended groom's Government job, his family owned "a shop in the village [...] that was a disqualification [...] a negative thing for them." Sanjiv (37) was divorced and spent the better part of our conversation explaining to me that his marriage did not work out mainly because of his wife's "parent's interference" and also analysing the various reasons for their opposition. "Number one [reason] is that this family I got married to is a top class family in the country. They are billionaires [...] Money had a say [...] money plays a huge role!" He then reflected that he too "came from a good family and I also had a good education, but unfortunately I couldn't finish my medicine." His wife was a doctor, but he had given up medicine to become an entrepreneur and had a number of small but successful business ventures to his credit. However, neither his wife nor her family approved of him "being out all the time on business." When I asked Sanjiv whether caste had anything to do with it, he responded by saying that "some of [her family] have got married to foreigners and some to Burghers, so there is no caste barrier." His final reflection was that perhaps it had "something to do with new richness [...] her father is top-class businessman." Even though Sanjiv's wife's family came from a business background, they were an already established business family who had converted their wealth into education unlike Sanjiv who had given up education to pursue business and, therefore, was judged as being nouveau riche.

A family's urban or rural background also played a role in how people asserted distinction. Even though Swarna was very happy with her daughter's marriage to a more educated and well connected family, she nevertheless made the distinction between her family's more urban background and their rural origins. *"Their ways are a little rural—they are from a village, but the family is very educated [...] They had rubber estates [...] their house is far bigger than ours. But they are rural people. They have those village ways."* Swarna here is perhaps referring to differences in lifestyle and

mannerisms. Nāmali's and Subhashini's (cousins) delineation of the distinction between urban and rural had to do with manners and taste. Both of them had talked to me about their experiences with accompanying their family when they visited the homes of several potential brides for Nāmali's brother. Nāmali's tone was derisive in her dismissal of one woman from a rural middle-class family:

> *When she came out she was looking like this (N mali puts her head down and purses her lips). [She] didn't even look at the face. Imagine going ninety kilometres to Ratnapura (a town in the Sabaragamuwa province) and not even looking at the face! I wanted to hammer her! [...] Those are the kind of nutcases we have found (laughing).*

Subhashini described another family they had visited in Kurunegala—a town in the North-Western province of Sri Lanka.

> *"They told us to sit, but the couch set was too big for the hall [...] If we sat we didn't have a place for our legs because the chairs were so close together[...] So, a little godē. They had just bought a couch not thinking whether it suited their house."*

People's behaviour and lifestyles were often judged to be *godē*—a composite term that implies at times vulgarity and showiness and at other times rural, meaning outmoded and unfashionable. Both meanings refer to people's origins either in the lower-classes or their more recent migration from the village. People were also sometimes classified as '*mod*'; rather than it being the opposite of *godē,* 'mod' implied the indiscriminate emulation of Western lifestyles. For the urban middle-class, striking a balance between these two was important.

English-speaking and non-English speaking was another marker of distinction that the urban middle-class used to position it's 'self' against the 'other'.[100] The implication of such a division is that the inability to speak English or converse in English fluently, or even if it was spoken with the 'wrong' accent, indicated a family's distance from its rural roots or more humble socioeconomic beginnings.[101] Ranjan recalls how even though his mother was more educated than her father, their marital arguments would often degenerate into *"my father criticizing my mother because she didn't speak good*

[100] See Gunesekera (2010) for a detailed discussion of this divide.
[101] A person's accent here refers mainly to diction and how one enunciates English words, and the inflection and intonation of speech (Gunesekera 2010).

English." Roshini (32) contrasted her marriage with that of her cousin Udeshika's by comparing their respective husbands' fluency in English.

> *I always liked a person who liked reading and had a certain kind of intellectual bent [...] Maybe I am being petty, but the reason why I am saying this is that Udeshik*a *Akkie* (older-sister) *and Mevan Aiya (older-brother) are very different in that way. I'm saying this all in a loving way; sometimes Mevan Aiya's English grammar isn't perfect and he doesn't read a lot—very different in terms of background.*

Decorum was also an important indicator of class distinction. Keshini (54), for example, explained to me why her mother's oldest brother was estranged from their family for marrying a "flashy" woman. "*She didn't suit [our family] [...] they were not rich but there was something refined about [my grandparents]."* Keshini explained why she, even though her aunt was a *"very nice person,"* kept her distance from her:

> *She watches every Hindi film and memorizes every song and dance [...] [If she got] some money she needs to spend it on glittery jewellery [...] [And] she laughs at jokes that are not commonly shared in our families [...] very sexist jokes or vulgar jokes.*

As shown above, the urban middle-class rarely asserted markers of distinction to contrast themselves to the lower or upper classes, but mainly to distinguish themselves from within the ranks. While education and wealth were the more overt markers of class, the more subtle markers of distinction—lifestyle, decorum, knowledge of English, place of residence, and schools attended—were often deployed by people to claim a slightly higher rung on the middle-class ladder. As Bourdieu (1984) in his theory of social class distinction posits, class fractions are determined not only by social and economic capital, but also cultural capital. Differences between 'us' and 'others' were glossed using different pairs of contrasts, and how and when they were deployed was context-specific: sometimes it was educated versus the *nouveau riche*; in others it was being respectable as opposed to *nouveau riche;* and in still others it was about being wealthy or ordinary (*samānya*). Similarly: English-speaking versus Sinhala speaking; *godē* versus 'mod'; urban versus rural; Westernized as opposed to being culturally authentic; professionals versus businessmen; the Westernized elite versus the *nouveau riche*. Depending on the context the nuances of each contrast subtly changed making it impossible to compile a neat laundry list of

what constituted distinction specifically in marriage. This is because how people evaluated distinction was not in categorical terms, but in relational terms—how you know yourself is always in relation to others.

3.3 Middle-class Respectability

Running parallel to and entrenched in the urban Sinhala middle-class' enactment of class and modernity is the discourse on maintaining respectability. As discussed in chapter two, 'respectability' has been and still is a central trope through which the ideal Sinhala woman and man is constructed and evaluated. In this section I look at how maintaining respectability was critical to marriage and why it was often the source of inter-generational tensions. I show how the concept of respectability has a strong moral undertone and is linked to family status. Parents placed the onus of respectability on women, who were expected to uphold their character, safeguard their reputation, and act with decorum in public, because to compromise on respectability was to jeopardize their chances of securing a good marriage.

A woman's dress was an important indicator of decency. After I had completed the formal interview with Nāmali, we chatted for a while over tea about various things including what it was like to live with one's in-laws. She told me that her mother-in-law was *"much more open-minded."* Indicating what she was wearing—a sleeveless T-shirt and pair of Bermuda shorts that ended just above her knee—Nāmali rolled her eyes and told me "*if my mother saw me like this, she would have had a hundred things to say."* Nāmali told me that her mother did not permit her to wear tops or dresses without sleeves *"even in the house."* The rules regarding women's dress seemed to have, in some cases, become more conservative. Nayanthara and her sister Lalanie had shown me photos of them as teenagers when I visited each of them. In them the sister were attired in what were the latest fashions of the 1960s—flared mini skirts that were a few inches above the knee, fitted blouses with sleeves, large belts, and hair coiffed in beehives or flicked out. Their daughters, however, were much more conservatively dressed given the range of current fashions. Dulani, who I had known for more than five years, always wore pants with long *kurta* tops that covered her hips

and buttocks, while Chulani was clad in jeans and T-shirt each time I had met her, but neither were tight fitting. Both wore no make-up and their hair was mid-length and tied in simple pony-tails. When I commented to Nayanthara on how fashionable she had been, her response illustrated the struggle to define the standards of morality and decency in the present-day.

> *Yes, in those days we were fashionable [...] Now [the children] look at the photographs and say "if we wear something like this!" When I look at the photos I also wonder "did we wear such short minis!" And [the children] laugh at us [...] But in those days it wasn't so indecent (she uses the English word here), I don't know why. But today [...] when girls wear tight [clothes], short, tight skirts, it looks quite indecent.*

Even though her daughter Chulani was by most standards 'decently' attired, Chulani had told me how her mother insisted she wear sari whenever a potential groom visited with his family because *"that's how things are done."* A sari was usually worn by the potential bride to denote the formality of the occasion. According to convention, the young woman also adopts a somewhat reserved and bashful demeanour when interacting with the groom's family. I believe the sari presents a woman's body as moral and regulated. The sari is considered the authentic dress of the Sinhala people and in many public and sometimes even private institutions the sari is considered the 'proper' attire for women. In fact, parents visiting schools are encouraged to wear the sari because it was considered the most 'decent' attire for mothers.[102] Hence, how a woman dressed was an important indicator of her respectability. As De Alwis (1997) argues, respectability is embodied and perpetuated in the Sinhala woman as she is cast as the repository of culture and tradition.

Maintaining respectability also meant that women's mobility was restricted as being seen in public with a man would compromise her reputation. As described in chapter five, the younger generation, therefore, conducted a better part of their courtships on the phone, only occasionally meeting up but always without their parents' knowledge.

[102] Many state-run boys' schools have, in fact, introduced a rule dictating that mothers can only visit the school premises if they are clad in sari. Many people talked about how some women 'indecent' style of dress has embarrassed young boys or even lured them into having inappropriate relationships with such mothers.

If young men were allowed to visit home, they would usually come with a friend or a group of friends. Even though Gunavatī had met up with her future husband and even gone out for films after their betrothal, she was concerned about her daughter Nāmali's reputation when they found out she was romantically involved with Sampath.

> *We didn't like them going about here and there. For a mother, when people in the neighbourhood see it's very embarrassing [...] So, we told our daughter. Then she said "what is wrong with getting friendly?" Don't you know, she's quite different—not like my son.*

Although Nāmali (30) questions her mother's concern for her reputation, Nāmali admitted to being *"secretive"* and *"doing things without anyone knowing [...] only [my cousin] knew"*—clearly indicating that she was mindful of the repercussions to her reputation if she was indiscreet. It was only after a marriage was confirmed that young men were permitted to visit on their own. Young women's reputations were closely guarded by parents even after there was a formal acknowledgement from the families and sometimes even after the legal registration of a marriage. Subhashini (30) told me how her mother had told her it was *"unnecessary to go on outstation trips"* even if she was legally married. Subhashini and Pahan had purchased a house close to her father's small flat he used during the week after they had legally registered their marriage, but before their wedding. Pahan started living there because according to Sinhala custom—*"it was unlucky to keep a house empty."* After work, Subhashini would visit Pahan before going to her father's flat. *"My brother would always barge in after about an hour [...] He would never let us be alone."* Even though Subhashini always described her father as someone who *"didn't say anything directly"* by openly confronting his children, it seems that her younger brother took on the responsibility of monitoring his sister's behaviour before her wedding.

The importance of maintaining respectability was rarely an explicit discussion between parents and children. The younger generation were usually expected to intuitively understand what was at stake if they did not act with decorum and compromised their reputation. Sewwandi (30) explained to me the *"interesting way"* her mother *"put things across"* by talking about a cousin who had eloped after defying the family's disapproval of the relationship. *"So when my mother was talking about it, I just got an*

idea how she would want things to happen to me, what she was thinking about, things that she expects." Prasadhini (30) explained how her mother would often communicate her expectations by referring to her father. *"Ammi [mother] would say 'you know Appacci [father] wouldn't like it' [...] it was a cunning way of putting it across to us."* She also recalled how her mother *"really lost it"* when she had heard Prasadhini whistling. Whistling in Sri Lanka is usually thought to be something young men loitering on the street indulged in; even if men could whistle tunes at home, it was not considered decorous for a woman to be heard whistling.

A majority of the younger women talked about how schools articulated more directly what their parents implied by setting the standards and monitoring what was considered appropriate for a young woman interested in maintaining her reputation and her family's honour. Sewwandi explained how her school was:

> *Very strict. Even talking to a boy in uniform can get you in to a lot of trouble. If you have a boyfriend, they would make a big issue about that [...] and if something like that happens it is impossible to stay in that school [...] they just put you down if you have an affair."*

She related to me how a friend of hers *"was told not to travel in the van her brother drove [...] [because] other people will not know if it is the brother or not [...] they told her not to sit even in the front seat. Crazy!"* Schools in some ways acted as a foil for parents. Because Sinhalese parents rarely spoke directly to or openly confronted their children about good behaviour, rules that extended beyond the legal jurisdiction of the school was one way of conveying more explicit messages about respectability.[103] In fact, schools seem to have an explicit mandate to regulate respectability; policing of sexuality is a critical part of class formation that schools promise to undertake. Moreover, because Sinhala parents strove to safeguard the integrity of the family by working towards reaching a compromise with their children rather risking disintegration by punishing or issuing ultimatums, schools, I believe, often stepped in to regulate and discipline girls' behaviour.

[103] See Chapin (2010) for an illuminating discussion on Sinhalese mothers' parenting practices.

Respectability, I believe, was, however, more about maintaining a public image of morality than about a person's internal values. Shalini clearly articulated this whilst talking about how she grew up.

> *There were so many restrictions [...] I had to live up to their expectations [...] behave well, being polite [...] that kind of thing specially for the outsiders. Just to please others, which was very important for them.*

Shalini remembers being *"dead scared about even talking on the phone with a boy"* because her mother, rather than *"give advice"* would use *"phrases like [...] how can you do this? What will the others think? How can we go on the road? How can we live in this town? [...] It was always to please the friends and the society ."* Ruwanpura (2011) in her study of morality among university women argues that women, although they were very "particular about their performance of respectability when they were on campus and among their peers" would give expression to their desires when they were protected from the "penetrating gaze" of peers and parents (p.263). This is demonstrated through an incident Roshini related to me about her childhood. Roshini, in contrast to Shalini, described her mother as someone who "gave her freedom" and explained how her "mother was completely fine" with her having friends who were boys, especially two boys—classmates in the international school she attended—who, together with her best friend, formed part of her "clique." Roshini talked about these boys frequently visiting her at home and also of her "hanging out" with them on weekends. Roshini remembers, however, an incident that strained the relationship of trust she had with her mother who was also a teacher in the school she attended. Roshini's clique had been put in charge of organizing a school event. On one particular day, they had been working through the night in her best friend Rochelle's house when they had fallen asleep in the hall.

> *Rochelle took these pictures of the three of us when we woke up [...] I don't know how it happened, but somehow that particular picture [...] Someone had put it in my mother's locker[...] When I met my mother after school, I knew something was wrong [...] She told me 'Roshini, you have completely shamed me [...] I give you so much freedom and this is what you do to me [...] How I can I face the teachers again?' [...] It was horrible. I felt so bad for her.*

Like Roshini's mother, parents sometimes turned a blind eye to what their children did in private as long as it did not happen in the glare of the public eye. Young women confessed to going out on "day trips" alone with their boyfriends to hotels where they experimented with sexual activities, but this was done with the utmost discretion by young people who did not even confide in their friends about such experimentation for fear of "it getting back" to their parents. Some young women even talked about how their boyfriends who worked outside of Colombo were allowed to stay overnight in their homes when they visited. This was considered better than the couple "being seen outside"—indicating that maintaining respectability was more about the public face of morality than actual behaviour.

4 Conclusion – The Merging of Caste and Class in the Everyday

Although I have, for the purpose of clarity, discussed caste and class differences separately they are not often mutually exclusive categories in delineating difference. In everyday conversations caste terms continue to be used but are deployed to denote difference in class status indicating the way caste and class are enmeshed in people's ideas about what constitutes difference. For example, the fundamental difference between the people belonging to the *Karāwe* caste and those from the *Goyigama* caste was said to be one of decorum. Even *Karāwe* people would admit that the *Goyigama* people were more 'refined' and 'decorous'; *Goyigama* people often described *Karāwe* people as 'loud,' and 'lacking finesse.' To this day mothers would admonish their daughters "not to shout like a fisherwoman"—the reference here is to the *Karāwe* caste's identification with fisher-folk whose trade made them loud and crass. Moreover, people without refined manners are often described as '*Karā',* which is a derivation of *Karāwe.* It is a derogatory term used to classify people whose behaviour is considered uncouth. If one was *Karāwe*, on the other hand, such differences would be asserted with a sense of pride. Although the women were loud and less refined than the more decorous *Goyigama* ladies, their worldliness meant they were sharper than their somewhat backward and 'foolish (*mōda*)'

counterparts.[104] The term '*godē*' is another derogatory caste-based term used today to refer to people whose sense of dress, mannerisms, and general lifestyle are rural or old-fashioned or even 'showy' (*nouveau riche)*. The word *godē* is the opposite of *madē.* The origins of these terms are agrarian and refer to the main types of cultivation practiced by the Sinhalese: mada means 'mud' and refers to the highly irrigated muddy paddy fields in which rice is cultivated, while g*oda* refers to highland gardens where vegetables were grown, and also to the land where people's houses were built (Obeyesekere 1967, p.17). To refer to someone as '*godē'*, then, is perhaps to imply that their lifestyle and tastes were pedestrian because they were not rice cultivators and, therefore, were not from the high-caste *Goyigama* group.[105] Unlike the term '*Karā', the word 'godē'* is frequently used today without any implicit knowledge of its caste-based implications. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that terms used to signify caste difference have been subtly transformed to denote class differences.

In this chapter I have shown how caste and class considerations play a critical role in informing the choices people make in marriage. While caste endogamy has its origins in culture and tradition, class considerations emerged with capitalism. Even as modernity weakened some of the barriers for social mobility through enterprise and education, its emphasis on progress has, as we have seen, created an environment in which there is fierce competition to reach the top. In such a milieu, I showed how marriage is a principal strategy for social mobility. And in a society that is sharply segmented on class lines, I showed how class distinction together with the privilege of good birth is simultaneously deployed to assert prestige and status resulting in the reproduction of inequality. I argued that even though the trope of individual choice takes precedence in personal narratives about marriage, the underlying preoccupation with caste and class demonstrate how choices continue to be shaped and structured by social norms. The structuring of choice is significant because it says something critical about the relationship between individual agency and how people in Sri Lanka experience the self. Even though an individual and modern self is foregrounded in

[104] I am grateful to Harini Amarasuriya for this insider's point of view about how her female *Karāwe* relatives frequently spoke about themselves in relation to the *Goyigama* women.
[105] I am grateful to Garvin Van Dort for this valuable insight about the possible origins of the term '*godē'.*

narratives about marriage and family, the ways in which families negotiate between and compromise on collective expectations and individual desires in practice reveal how people continue to be deeply embedded in family and kinship relations. Moreover, even as notions of caste and class are intrinsically tied up with the concept of family honour, the compromises people make to accommodate each other reveal a relational self that continues to experience itself as part of an integral whole.

7 - The Limits of Choice and Agency

Contingent Narratives of the 'Self'

1. Introduction

Thus far I have shown how individual agency is central to young people's narratives about marriage, and how the 'choosing person' is integral to the presentation of the self as modern and progressive. I then looked at how these claims of agency mask the ways in which choice is structured by, on the one hand, a collective investment in the 'choosing person' and, on the other, an emphasis on making the 'right' choices. These 'choices', I noted, thinly veil the class and caste considerations that structure decisions regarding marriage. A 'successful' marriage, I argued, is an important indication of progress—yet another criterion of modernity. Parents and children, therefore, have a collective investment not only in the discourse of the choosing individual, but also in making sure that these choices are the 'right' ones. Just as the younger generation is keen to present themselves as agents in control of their lives, parents are equally desirous of presenting their children as thinking actors who are capable of making 'right' choices without parental coercion. Both want to demonstrate to the wider community that the investment in the modern values of education, freedom, and independence produce young people capable of foresight in making life's important decisions. In fact, agency in marriage is an indication of how successfully families have been able to produce modern subjects without compromising on morals and values.

In this chapter I ask whether the trope of individual agency is universal to all narratives about marriage and family. What happens when people make the 'wrong' choices? What kinds of stories are told, for instance, when marriages 'fail'? If, as I have shown in the previous chapters, stories about 'successful' marriages that point to the 'right' choices people make is, as Edley (2001) describes, the culture's "hegemonic narrative", then what interpretative repertoires—i.e., explanatory resources derived from "key metaphors" and "certain tropes or figures of speech" (Wetherell and Potter 1998, p.172)—do people draw from in explaining divorce and justifying their 'single' status?

Although the life histories that I collected during my field work were predominantly from people in stable marriages—those who implied or explicitly described their marriages as 'good' or 'successful', I also met women who described their marriages as 'failures' but for whom divorce or even separation was unthinkable. I also actively sought out people who were divorced or single from both generations to find out how they explained the unconventional choices they had made and whether these deviations from the norm were acceptable to their parents and relatives, and also to society in general. I found that these narratives were qualitatively different from those of their contemporaries; that, in fact, narratives of choice that hinted or emphasised individual agency in the stories of 'successful' marriages were down-played or denied when marriages failed or did not take place. In examining a different set of stories about marriage I realised that narratives of agency, which are deployed in certain contexts, are downplayed or denied in others; that the 'self', which is presented as making individual choices and actively shaping its own destiny in one context, is presented as the object of fate and circumstance in others. Reynolds and Wetherell (2003) claim that stories people tell are usually "variable and inconsistent since different [interpretative] repertoires construct different versions and evaluations of participants and events according to the rhetorical demands of the immediate context" (pp.496-497).

If the trope of agency is not universal to all narratives about marriage, then in what contexts is the choosing person emphasised and acclaimed, and in what contexts is it downplayed or even censured? If cultural narratives about the person are variable and context driven, then what does this have to say about 'common-sense' understandings about the 'self' as unitary and stable (Spencer 1997) and the relationship between personhood and agency, which is that a person acts with their own interest in mind (Mody 2008; Ortner 2001; Strathern 1987)? Already in the previous chapters the assertion of a 'choosing person' was deconstructed to reveal a less unitary, relational self with permeable boundaries. I wonder then what types of persons emerge through these alternative narratives, and what more they say about 'the choosing person.'

In this chapter I argue that choice in marriage is culturally sanctioned and publicly commended only when it results in a 'successful' union between a man and woman—where the new family unit is able to present itself as: living harmoniously; contributing to the kin group through timely reproduction and bringing up 'good' children; achieving social mobility; and enduring life's difficulties without disintegration. I argue that outside of this structure narratives of individual agency and self assertion become culturally censured and, therefore, must be denied through the deployment of different kinds of narratives. In this chapter I examine the alternative narrative devices, or 'interpretative repertoires', that women deploy when marriages failed or when women rejected marriage altogether. I look at how these narrative devices have changed through the generations. Finally, I explore what objectives these narratives serve for the narrator and her audience.

In order to answer the questions I pose, I present three sets of case-studies that illuminate what mutable conceptions and articulations of the person reveal about the connections between the 'self,' narrative, and the social world. In the previous chapters I used the term 'narrative' in a general sense to mean people's accounts of marriage. Many of these accounts were also generally referred to as 'stories' people told about getting married. I excerpted from these stories in explicating the dominant themes emerging from them, but rarely presented the story either in its entirety or even a significant proportion of it. In this chapter, however, I summarise a person's life-history as presented to me using substantive quotations to reveal both the structure and flow of a narrative. I draw on Bruner's (1990) definition of 'narrative' for my analysis. Bruner describes narratives as deriving from the nearly universal tradition of 'story-telling' whose "principal property is its inherent sequentiality" (p.49). He defines a narrative as "composed of a unique sequence of events, mental states, happenings involving human beings as characters or actors" where these constituent elements do not have "a meaning of their own" but are given meaning "by their place in the overall configuration […]as a whole" (Bruner 1990, p.43). Bruner also emphasises that "a narrative can be 'real' or 'imaginary' without loss of its power as a story […]In other words, the sequence of its sentences, rather than the truth or falsity of any of those sentences, is what determines its overall configuration or plot" (p.44).

The point Bruner makes about the integrity of a narrative's structure taking precedence over the veracity of the story is important to the stories I present in this chapter. As I will elucidate, while stories were 'inherently sequential' in their telling and my listening, there were many instances during the process of analysis that I questioned the 'truth' of these stories in the sense of their historical accuracy.

2. The Older Generation – Selflessness and Dedication to Others

Several women I met from the older generation described their marriages as a 'failure' or 'unsuccessful' (*asārtaka*). These women, however, continued to live with their husbands, and some of them continued to operate as a unit, at least in my presence, welcoming me and other guests to their home, discussing household affairs and, in some instances, hosting a meal together on a later date when they found out I was pregnant.[106] I was taken aback when, for example, Aunty Mallika, the woman who had helped me throughout my field work and whose husband I had chatted with each time I visited their home, told me, when I formally interviewed her eventually, that her married life had been unhappy from its inception. Her friend Manel, after listening to my preamble about my research, declared, even before I could switch on my recorder, that her marriage was *"unsuccessful."* When I nervously glanced at her husband who was watching TV, Manel assured me he was partially deaf. Throughout our interview, however, Manel got up a number of times to attend to her husband's needs. The stories that older women like Mallika and Manel told drew from the culturally sanctioned subject positions of 'the long-suffering wife' and 'self-sacrificing mother' (Edley 2001; Reynolds and Wetherell 2003). Unlike their contemporaries who actively claimed their role in making marriage and family a success, these women often presented themselves as victims of fate and resolutely denied any part they may have played in the 'failure' of their marriages. The 'victim narrative' at first only cast into relief these women's resilience in enduring difficult life circumstances without giving

[106] The Sinhalese-Buddhists believe that feeding a pregnant woman is a 'good' deed and results in the accumulation of merit on their behalf. The more merit one accumulates the greater chance one has in improving one's *karma* (fate) resulting in a better birth in the next cycle of birth and death. Providing food to pregnant women is part of people's (Buddhists and others) daily practice and forms part of their social obligations to kin, neighbours, and friends.

into despair. It took several re-readings of the interview, hours of reflection, and attempts at unravelling often convoluted stories before I was able to 'see' how these narratives served to obfuscate these women's acts of defiance and self-assertion and 'explained' non-normative acts and behaviour in a culturally coherent way. As Bruner (1990) argues, narratives have "powerful means that are purpose-built for rendering the exceptional and the unusual into comprehensible form" (p.47). I should hasten to note here that not all stories of suffering and sacrifice seemed to conceal acts of resistance and self assertion. Some were mainly stories about women's resilience in the face of suffering and unhappiness. The stories I examine in this chapter, however, were *more* than accounts of resilience. They were instances in which the narrative of suffering and sacrifice concealed 'other' selves that co-existed with the culturally prescribed role of self-sacrificing mother that women in unhappy marriages were compelled to take on.

2.1. 'Unnatural' Husbands and 'Natural' Mothers – Love, Obsession, and Maternal Devotion

Chitranganie was 73 when I interviewed her in 2009. We were introduced by her son Janith and daughter-in-law Thushari who I had interviewed for my research. When I met with Thushari for her interview, Janith had chatted to me at length about my research. He spontaneously shared with me some of the difficulties of bringing up three daughters and how much Thushari and he looked to his mother for advice and support not only with childcare, but in many other aspects of their life. He then insisted I should speak to his mother "*because*," he said, "*you will gain a lot of valuable information for your research*." Even Thushari mentioned her mother-in-law a number of times during the interview, indicating that Chitranganie played a central role in her life as well. Chitranganie was a statuesque woman; she commanded the attention in the room by a certain authoritative demeanour, which she maintained even when she was coddling her youngest grand-daughter. Her grandchildren seemed to adore and respect their grandmother and often interrupted the interview to ask Chitranganie questions on various subjects or to beg her to intervene in settling minor disputes between the sisters. It was apparent too that Thushari respected her mother-in-law in

the way she deferred to her on various occasions, and that they had mutual affection for each other, which was evident in the interactions I observed during the three hours I spent in Thushari's home. It was clear that Chitranganie was the matriarch of the family.

I provide this preamble to indicate how much I was taken aback by Chitranganie's life story; at least the way she chose to recount it in the first part of the interview. Nothing about the way Chitranganie presented herself to me or the way she conducted herself with her family hinted at the sense of tragedy with which she talked about her life. Chitranganie's story was a 'classic' narrative of a woman caught in the grips of patriarchal control with little power to steer the trajectory of her life. She recalled with anger and resentment the abrupt ending of her school-girl life through a forced marriage which prevented her from pursuing her dreams and realizing her potential. She had been the helpless victim of her father's patriarchal control and the unbridled desires of her teacher. She blamed her parochial convent education for her lack of knowledge in dealing with inappropriate sexual advances, and also for being completely unprepared for the realities of marriage.

In brief, Chitranganie's story reads thus: She was the eldest daughter of a wealthy aristocratic Kandyan family. She was a bright student who had ambitions of attending university and excelled both in her academic work and also in sports and the arts. At the age of 15, Chitranganie caught the attention of a teacher—a 24-year-old recent graduate of the University of Peradeniya who had been newly hired by the school. Without any regard for her reputation or her future, he relentlessly pursued her by singling her out for special attention.[107] He detained her after class for extended conversations, gave her notes and letters, and often followed her home after school. Chitranganie's father, when he heard rumours of the alleged relationship from members of the school staff and also the community, stopped her from attending school, forced the teacher to marry his daughter, and then disowned her from the family. Chitranganie describes the situation she found herself in as "*between the devil and the deep blue sea*." If her father had been overly protective of her and

[107] See chapter three for a discussion on the importance of maintaining 'respectability' for women

uncompromising in his determination to protect his family honour, she describes her husband as being *"obsessed"* and *"controlling"* of his young wife. She related how he isolated her in the house by preventing her from participating in any kind of social life. It was later, once Chitranganie's three sons were born and started attending school that she realised she had to do something to ensure her children's futures were not destroyed by her husband's irresponsibility and indifference. When he abruptly retired at the age of 40 after many failed attempts at holding a stable job, Chitranganie claimed that she had no choice but to start earning and did so by becoming a seamstress—a vocation she could pursue without having to leave the house.

Chitranganie's story that I summarised above was, however, not told in a chronological way, but had the "inherent sequentiality" of a story (Bruner 1990). It was after several readings of the interview transcript that I managed to work out the chronology of events and piece together the various episodes of her life. Chronology was important to me to make sense of what seemed like parallel yet conflicting strands of her story. Her initial story—the story of an interrupted girlhood followed by an unhappy marriage in which she was trapped both metaphorically and literally—dominated the narrative and left a lasting impression on the listener. Later, once her life-story was told, Chitranganie began to refer to other experiences in her life that did not seem to fit in with the original story. Most of these events—her dancing, her career in the garment industry, her work with a famous dress designer, and then migrating overseas for work—seemed to have taken place much later in her life history when she had finally taken control of her life for the sake of the children. Even then, these experiences and Chitranganie's actions seemed in direct conflict with how she had first portrayed herself—as a suffering wife and self-sacrificing mother. When I pieced together the various strands of her story, I realised that the initial narrative concealed the ways in which Chitranganie had asserted herself and acted with far greater agency than she let on.

In the following section I will examine the ways in which the structure and chronology of Chitranganie's narrative enabled her to tell her story in a culturally acceptable way. As discussed in chapter one, narrative and discourse are characterised by inconsistency

because people draw on competing arguments and values in making sense of their lives (Reynolds and Wetherell 2003). These inconsistencies give rise to 'ideological dilemmas' as people "work with the inconsistency in the repertoires they draw on and try to reconcile contradictory argumentative threads" (Reynolds et al 2007, p.336). Chitranganie at first related her story as a long-suffering wife and mother who had put her individual desires and personal aspirations aside and acted only for the sake of her children. Later, she presented herself as a woman who resisted her destiny and fought back to create a different life to which she had been seemingly condemned. Her story illustrates the way in which the act of telling one's life-story is structured by the dominant ideology of a culture, but is simultaneously evaluated on the basis of other competing repertoires about personal agency and identity.

Chitranganie tells her story

Chitranganie begins her story by talking about her 'fateful' transfer from a convent to a mixed Government Central school—a decision her father made so that all his children could live at home and attend school together. Right from the outset Chitranganie presents herself as having been an exceptional young woman and refers to her life as having been *"messed up"* repeating this phrase throughout the interview to emphasise, I believe, the potential she never realised.

> *My life was messed up, messed up [...] I was the Head Girl, the school Games Captain [...] I was an outstanding figure. And there was this person. It's the person to whom I got married. He had just finished his degree and awaiting results. He had come to teach in [my school]. He was about 24 years [...] I was around 15.*

Throughout the interview, which lasted about an hour and a half, Chitranganie did not mention her husband's name even once. Neither did she refer to him as her husband or, as is the Sinhala custom, refer to him as the 'children's father'. 'This person' translates in Sinhala to '*ekkena*'—a neutral term that denotes distance and indicates that there is no relationship of any significance between the speaker and the person being spoken about. Usually Sinhalese people would refer to their spouses as *'ape ekkena'*—'our person'. It could also be translated to '*meya*'—a term that obfuscates the nature of the relationship precisely because it is an intimate one. Chitranganie,

however, spoke in English, and the tone with which she referred to 'this person' indicated distance. A better translation would be the term *'eya'*—a disrespectful term if used in reference to one's equals or superiors, and is only tolerated if used in connection to someone of lower status if they do not deserve one's respect or affection.[108] Her husband, although central to Chitranganie's initial story of suffering, was continuously referred to as 'this person'—conveying effectively that even the mention of his name or his role in her life was distasteful to her and that she wanted to create as much distance between them despite his being her husband and the father of her three children. It was also a way of conveying to me, and perhaps even to herself, that he was a non-entity in her life now because as I later found out, Chitranganie now lived on her own—a decision she had made after her sons were married.

Although Chitranganie felt that her father had done her a great injustice by forcing her to marry, it was her husband she blamed the most for her early marriage, which foreclosed her ambitions for higher education. Perhaps this indicates that it is culturally more acceptable to be critical of husbands than fathers, and present a happy childhood in contrast to an unhappy marriage. During the entire narrative, Chitranganie did not suggest even once that she felt she had, even inadvertently, played a part in what transpired during her school days. She blamed her early convent education for her lack of experience with the opposite sex and her husband for taking advantage of her naiveté.

> *I thought that he thought of me as his favourite student. Even when the class was over before going to another class he would come and speak to me [...] But for us in the convent—they drew a line between the sexes […] My whole life messed up because of that […] The education was very good, everything you know—social etiquette, studies everything was good. But we did not know anything! They were foreign nuns, it was a little England. So when this person*

[108] Children and people of lower status like domestic helpers are often admonished if they inadvertently use the term *'eyā'* to refer to someone of higher status because it is considered disrespectful. *'Eyā,'* when directly translated means 'he/she' as in *'eyā mata kivuwa'* (he told me). The respectful way to refer to a person is to continue to use the term by which one addresses the person. So a child will, in referring to her father, say '*My father* wanted to know whether *my father* could drop by tomorrow because *my father* wants to discuss something.' In the written form, the term '*ohu'* translates to 'he' and is used because it is a respectful term. But it is not used in when speaking.

started making advances at me, and my father—he went mad. I had no idea.

A: So, aunty, did you have any feeling that he was interested in you?

C: I had a feeling he was interested, but about marriage, sex, nothing did I know. I did not know anything. I was admiring him as a person who was above all the others in that school. I admired him for his education, his knowledge [...]I used to go in the train and this person [would] meet me at the station [...] this person [would stand] at the end of the lane waiting for me to come after school [...] He was coming behind me speaking to me, meeting me. I was also scared because this is my teacher, and I was scared to say 'don't come [behind me]' thinking that he might put me down in class [...] you can never say 'no' to these people.

Chitranganie blamed her father for his lack of empathy and for placing the family's honour over her wellbeing, and her mother for her lack of compassion and cowardice in her inability to stand up to her father. She is shocked by her parents' attitude and their treatment of her, and relates the series of events that led to her marriage as simply 'happening' to her.

So when this person started this the Principal got to know about it and people were talking about it so much so that I couldn't go to that school any more [...] My father, he was mad, and as a father he should have not taken it so seriously. I even suggested 'let's get back to the convent'. He said 'I will not change my mind' [...] My father got so angry and took me out.

My father was so strict that I wanted to get out [...] I thought everything will be alright now if I run away from home. But before I could think of any such thing at 17 years […] my father said 'none of this nonsense; this is going to bring a very bad reputation on my family and the other children who are still studying [...] You are setting a very bad example!' What do you think I felt? Did I do a job? Did I have money? I had to depend on [my father] even for this marriage. He said 'from your little age I have spent so much of money on you. I have put you to the best school and this is not what I expected.' He said 'you must get married [...] you have to get married.'

> *I was so scared it was like [being caught] between the devil and the deep blue sea. My mother never supported me; instead she joined my father and she started going on. My god! […] 'This is the worst thing you could have done to our family!'*
>
> *My father went all of a sudden to meet his father and said 'your son has not been allowing my daughter to study. She can't settle down. I can't keep her in school anymore. So this is going to be a very bad thing on my family and I want her to get married to this person.' This person was only 24 and had no money. So, my father said [to me] all of a sudden 'you must get ready to marry'. No ceremonies, nothing. Relatives were not told. Nothing had happened to me. Just a person talking to me and sometimes sending me a letter. So now what to do? I had to obey my father I was so scared of my father, I was so scared of my of my parents, I had to sort of give in because I was afraid of my father and I respected him.*

Chitranganie describes the events preceding her hasty marriage as completely out of her control. She consistently avoids placing herself in the realm of action. She is merely acted upon. She presents herself as having no power to resist either the advances of her teacher or her father's course of action. She gives no indication of her own feelings for the teacher except her initial admiration for him, which later transforms to fear. She is resolutely silent about her reactions when she is accosted, followed, detained, and written and spoken to by him. The only time she intervenes is when she begs her father to re-enrol her in the convent at the point she is forcibly removed from school. Thereafter, she has absolutely no say in the way her father literally marches her into the Registrar's office. She describes it as her fate—"*it was criminal what they did to me [...] Somehow or the other I don't know if it is fate or what [...]"* In fact, fate is a dominant metaphor in Chitranganie's narrative that underscores her inability to intervene in changing the circumstances of her life. The question Chitranganie asks her husband after marriage reveals the utter denial of her agency.

> *One thing I asked this person recently, no, when we got married and settled down [was] 'didn't you find any girls in the university? There were so many girls in the university no, why didn't you allow me to study? I love to study'. I had ideals you know. I always thought I must grow up and do my studies very well. I must pursue my studies to the very limit. I liked to do all that, but this person [...] this person did not have an answer.*

Chitranganie presents her destiny as being completely controlled by her husband's desire, while her own remains unfulfilled. Even after she is freed from her father's control and begins to live alone with her husband after marriage, Chitranganie continues to describe her life as being out of her control. She is desperately unhappy and cannot seem to change the circumstances of her life.

> *Before the children I wanted to run away. I wanted to get back home and start my life all over again, but my father said 'don't step in' [...] so I [couldn't] run away [...] The relationship was nothing but this person wanting sex, and I hated it with all my heart because it was something forced on me. I didn't know anything about these things. It was just forced on me. Imagine if your person is not compatible and you're too young to understand this, what will happen? I was scared at first but some how I didn't have children for the first 4-5 years [...] I was so young he didn't allow me to do a job; he didn't allow me to do anything. I just stayed with the children [...] I don't know if he was obsessed or over protective or what. He didn't want me to speak to anybody or go out.*

It is perhaps significant that Chitranganie makes it a point to say that she was unfulfilled sexually. In her presentation of her younger 'self,' she kept emphasising that 'nothing happened'—implying that she remained chaste and that her actions need not have brought about the degree of shame it did on her family.

According to her narrative, the turning point in Chitranganie's life came when she became a mother and the children start growing up.

> *But anyway little by little I came to know the world. Though he wanted to suppress [me] I went to school with the children and I saw how other mothers were; how children were brought to school; the freedom they had. I started building up my courage little by little to stand on my own.*

It is at this juncture in her narrative that Chitranganie's husband abruptly retires and becomes a recluse, opening up a space for her to act. According to Chitranganie, her first glimpse of the outside world after years of social isolation and her realization that being a mother meant being accountable to her children galvanized her out of a state of helplessness and inaction. It is in her role as mother that Chitranganie can finally act; a sense of agency that was previously denied to her as a daughter and a wife.

Motherhood is the catalyst that propels her out of inaction into the realm of action. Motherhood also changes Chitranganie's fate.

> *In this life I have paid for what I don't know, maybe what I did in the past. But somehow when I got these three children I thought 'this one is weak; I can't be weak; these are my three sons; I must do something for them. I must try to do something where I could sit at home look after them and run the home and do everything.' Then I came to know about Mrs. Wallace—she had a dress making school [...] Then I thought this is the best thing to do: sit at home do some work and bring up the children because I didn't want to leave the children and go out to work leaving the three boys with the servant because the father was so irresponsible [...] So then I went to Mrs. Wallace and I did my Diploma in Dress making for 5 years there. I was well occupied and I felt happy looking after the children coming home and then doing my homework, coming in to contact with people [...] then the exams and all that was a great thing for me. Academic studies I couldn't do with the children in school. I had a good talent for dancing. I went to the College of Fine Arts and for 4 years I have been dancing there with (she mentions names of famous dancers). My husband jumped on me and said that 'you can't do these things you have to stop!' So I had to stop.*

It is at this point that the chronology of the story suddenly changes. From talking about being virtually imprisoned in her marital home until her children started schooling, she suddenly mentions not only taking up dressmaking, but also dancing. I had already heard from her son and daughter-in-law that Chitranganie had been a talented dancer who had performed publicly and had assumed (wrongly) that it was during her school years. So, when Chitranganie mentions dancing after the children were born, I interrupted her to clarify when exactly she took up dancing. Chitranganie then reveals that she had learned dancing soon after marriage.

> *A: So aunty, sorry to interrupt, you went for dancing after you got married or before?*
>
> *C: After I got married. I said 'I can't be staying at home and I want to go and I have the talents I like to do these things and I must do it!' [...] I told him that I was unhappy after getting married and I was just staying at home doing nothing. He comes home around three; till that time I'm at home doing nothing [...], but I told him that this cannot go on. This is what I like to do. I must do something for my father to see. Otherwise my father will laugh at me. So I went to dance at the College of Fine Arts [...] But when he saw me dancing on stage, and I*

> *was dancing with [mentions famous dancer of that era], and I was about to come to a place where I could teach dancing and have my own dancing school, he stopped me. He said 'no.' Then only I thought that I must do my dress-making. Even that he didn't like [...] He didn't want me to do anything. When I was in the senior I got a 20 page exercise book from him. I was wondering what this was all about. On that 20 page book every line he has written 'I will not allow you to enter a university', in every line!*

Until this juncture, the impression Chitranganie had given is that of a young woman who was powerless to resist the advances of an older man and equally powerless to challenge her father who assumed the worst of her. Until now, Chitranganie had been emphasising her lack of agency. Even in the above quotation she stresses her husband's control over her, implying that he had suddenly forbidden her from dancing. But what Chitranganie does not emphasise is that she had danced for four, perhaps even five years, and her exit from the stage coincided with her first pregnancy. Although at first she talked about being imprisoned in her home, in the above narrative Chitranganie admits to defying her husband's attempts to confine her. In working out the 'historical' sequence of events, even her dressmaking seems to have started before or as soon as the children were born rather than after her children started school. Chitranganie seemed to be obtuse about the degree of agency she had in her life. Although Chitranganie had, at this juncture, in answering my question revealed the fissures in her initial story, she reverts back to her victim narrative reiterating the injustice she faced at the hands of her father and the unhappiness with her husband, making it difficult for me to interrupt or steer the conversation in any other direction. But when her story reaches, once again, her transition into motherhood that compelled her to take her destiny in to her own hands, Chitranganie reveals even more information that challenges the impression of victimhood she had been projecting so far. From this point on Chitranganie's tone changes. She is at pains to describe her husband as a 'loser' and herself as courageous and determined. Most importantly, presents her new found agency as inspired by and directed towards being a selfless mother.

> ***C:*** *I had the courage when I had the children. I thought these three children have come in to my life; we have not invited them but they are here. We have to live for them; do something for them [...]*

He used to go out and come late in the evening. I don't know where he went. He was a loser. I thought [there was] no point going after him. Better that I stay like this, be with my children, take them out make them happy. When I started my dressmaking I got money. I had a lot of money because I did bridal orders. For 20 years I worked for (she mentions a very famous bridal designer)

***A:** Oh . . . . really!!*

***C:** When I finished my Diploma I went all out and said 'no longer will I stay at home, I must work.' And X* (she mentions one of the pioneer garment manufacturers) *called me. They gave me a very good offer. I was their all-round quality controller*

***A:** You actually went out to work as well?*

***C:** Yes. I said 'I'm going now. These children can't be let down. They have to be educated; they have to be pushed forward; they are boys [...] They have to come up in life—that is our responsibility.' And that was my only aim [...] I worked there for sometime and then I got an appointment in the Palace as a dress maker.*

A: Oh . . . . You went overseas!?

***C:** Yes. I said 'nothing doing; you're just sitting around at home; nothing is happening, these boys don't have anything. They are just going to school, coming back home, studying, and going back to school. They must have a life. They must join their friends; they must have holidays; go out on trips; they must be given their freedom. You're not doing anything for them. I have to do these things.' And I went to the King's Palace to sew.*

***A:** That's amazing*

***C:** I was kept imprisoned inside by this person, but as I grew up and as I came to know the world I thought nothing doing. Divorce and things I didn't want. I stayed with him for these children. I knew the boys wouldn't like to see their mother being divorced and running about with men. I thought I will somehow or another stay put. But other things I will do. What I have to do I will do. And I went all out; as far as King F's Palace* (here she mentions a Saudi prince). *I overcame. I don't know for my luck or what some unforeseen person would have seen and thought I should not be punished like this for what I have done or may be it was my courage, my own decisions*

***A:** So your children . . .?*

***C:** If I was crying, would have happened to my children? What I wanted in life[was] to see my children come up in life because my children had come to us uninvited. They didn't ask us whether to come. They never asked, 'are you going to be my mother? Shall I come? Can you look after me?' Nothing. Uninvited they have come and helpless children no. Who is going to look after them if it not the*

mother and father? Can you just forget them? Just let them have their own life? Let them get about [without] educating themselves? You can't.

.....

Chitranganie's narrative is not an unusual one. During my field work I met several women who spoke about their unhappy or 'unsuccessful' marriages quite openly. All of them claimed to have been pressurised into incompatible marriages by men who had been inexorably attracted to them. The cultural imagery these women drew from were those that portrayed their selves as unique, and also beautiful, innocent, and of good character. The men were 'obsessed,' and had a 'darker' side to them that they revealed only after marriage. The women described themselves as having special qualities in them that made them stand out from others, which they believe, instigated the initial attraction and subsequent obsession. Manel, for example, had caught the attention of a 17 year-old boy at the age of 13, who then assailed her with numerous letters declaring his love and extolled her beauty and virtue through poetry he published in the newspapers and magazines. Anoma had been asked by an older man she worked with to 'save' him from his bad habits because she was the only one capable of reforming him into a 'good' person like herself. It is interesting how these women present themselves as unique, but at the same are unable to control the trajectory of their life. What I wish to highlight here is the way in which their narratives obfuscated their agency at every level. According to the narratives, the marriages had not been approved by parents and kin, but took place because the men had compromised the young women's reputations by conspiring meetings in public places and broadcasting their interest in public. After marriage their lives were controlled by these men's volatile personalities who subjected them to emotional and sometimes physical abuse. Divorce or separation was not socially acceptable, especially given that these marriages had taken place amidst misgivings and warnings from parents and kin. Hence they accepted it as their fate to suffer. The impetus to endure came from a single source—a mother's commitment to her children. And it was through their exemplary mothering that these women were able to transform their lives from what had been a failure to one of success. By putting aside their own wellbeing for the sake of their children, these women described how much they

suffered and sacrificed for the sake of giving their children a brighter future. Now that the children had grown up, these women could see the fruits of their self-denial—their children had studied hard, found good jobs, and married well. The fathers did not feature in this narrative of motherhood. The men were usually portrayed as selfish or indifferent. They were 'good' mothers in spite of 'bad' fathers. Failure in these women's lives—denoted by an 'unsuccessful marriage'—had been single-handedly transformed by successful mothering.

Like Chitranganie's story many of these narratives of self-denial masked the ways in which these women had had often acted in defiance. Manel, for example, despite her claims of being completely under the control of her husband, seems to have refused to conform to his expectations of a perfect wife. She talked about how her 'weak' points irked her husband. They were her 'slovenly' appearance—an imperfectly draped sari and her refusal to wear makeup for social occasions—and her imperfect housekeeping—an untidy bedroom and an un-swept house. Despite his anger and also reports of his philandering with more beautiful women, Manel claims that she was not *"an over ambitious person"* because she was a teacher and had little time to attend to her appearance—*"the finesse part of me"*. *"What I really wanted in life"* claimed Manel, *"was to be a faithful wife and a good mother […] Things beyond that I was not so bothered."* She remembers asking her husband *"why are these things so important to you?"* These are indications of Manel's resistance to her husband's control; however, what was more significant was the scholarship she had earned to go the UK—something Manel mentioned only in passing. Despite her claims that her husband was possessive and restricted her mobility, Manel had sat for several exams at the British Council that finally earned a scholarship to England where she stayed for six months. She divulged this information while recounting an incident in which her husband locked her out of the house the day before her exam because she had been late coming home. She then later justified her decision to leave her daughter behind with a temperamental father because she had to earn a higher qualification to improve her earning potential as a teacher, and also because *"he was not giving me money even after marriage."*

Anoma also presented herself as having suffered because of her husband's negligence. For twenty years she had tried to 'save' her husband from his 'bad' habits, and endured the burden of parenting on her own. Her life story was mainly about how she worked tirelessly to ensure her children had a 'good' childhood and sacrificed everything she had to educate her children, including mortgaging her house and selling the small photographic studio she had bought after working overseas without leave for five consecutive years. Running beneath the dominant theme of the long-suffering wife and self-sacrificing mother, is Anoma's story of her conversion to Roman Catholicism and her becoming a modern person uninhibited by her husband's 'backward' and 'selfish' ways.

> *I had sacrificed everything [...] But when I finally found out that he is bad, I immediately cut my hair into a bob. I took my trousers and wore them [...] I told him 'let me be; leave me alone' [...] [All my friends] know I am like a man now.*

Anoma's comment about being 'like a man' was partly in reference to her appearance—short hair and trousers, and partly to her uninhibited mobility. Anoma, however, qualifies her statement by repeating that she spends most of her time in church—attending numerous services and novenas and volunteering by attending to the church garden and cooking for the church's various programmes. Anoma takes pains to present her independence as the freedom to go to church and model herself after the Virgin Mary so that, even though she cannot provide for her children financially, she can ensure a better future for her children through her acts of charity and fervent prayers. Her children, she repeatedly claimed, was proof of her good character and the supreme sacrifices she has made on their behalf.

In presenting Chitranganie's and also Manel's and Anoma's stories of suffering and sacrifice as obfuscating their agency, I do not wish to suggest that they did not suffer. What I wish to highlight is the way in which an 'agentic self' is denied in the context of unhappy marriages. Their stories also provide a glimpse into how narratives about the person and people's capacity to act are variously structured according to, as Spencer (1997) suggests, the institutional and social context in which they are told. In Sri Lanka, the choosing person and the modern woman that is acclaimed in one context is

rejected in another. A different set of interpretative repertoires are used in this context to explain the 'self.' However, narrators like Chitranganie, Manel, and Anoma, as Bruner (1990) argues, are not only drawing from cultural idioms to give reasons for their non-normative behaviour, but also "renegotiating communal meanings" (p.47) of how to be a woman. Discursive psychologists argue that discourse is never neutral; it does not merely reflect people's mental states, but is action oriented (Edley 2001; Wetherell and Potter 1988). Ahearn (2001b) asserts that "most linguistic anthropologists regard language as a form of social action [...] inextricably embedded in networks of socio-cultural relations" (p.110). Linguistic anthropologists understand language, culture, and society as mutually constituted where meanings are co-constructed through a dialogic process. "Language," Ahearn claims, "does not merely reflect an already existing social reality; it also helps to create that reality" (p.111). The stories that I re-created in this section are attempts by women at co-constructing meaning. Using culturally given templates, they describe their actions as taking place within the realm of motherhood compelling others to interpret their behaviour in the same terms. In doing so, these women do not merely reflect, but create social reality.

In the following section I will present Sriyawathie's story about single womanhood. Her story reveals the limits to which narratives can be deployed in shaping social reality. Even as narratives can open up room for manoeuvre, they can also structure and limit the freedom one desires to claim for one's self. Sriyawathie's story also problematizes in new ways the relationship between the person, agency, and the social world by revealing the embedded-ness of the social person (Parish 1994) and the limits imposed by family and kinship.

2.2. Being Single – Independence, Freedom, and Living for Others

Sriyawathie (58), or Sriya as she was known, was the youngest of three girls and, unlike her sisters, was unmarried. Her parents' families were both landowning farmers belonging to the high *Goyigama* caste. Sriya's mother's family had an important status in the village due to her grandfather being a *vedamahattayā* —an indigenous doctor, but she described her father's family as being relatively poor compelling her father to

leave home to join the police force in the newly independent Ceylon.[109] Sriya's family could be described as a 'traditional' Sinhala-Buddhist middle-class family with strong kinship ties and links to the village. Her sisters spoke in Sinhala and their mannerisms, dress, and demeanour indicated that they had not completely adopted 'urban' ways. Sriya, on the other hand, portrayed a more 'modern' outlook through her short hair, her three-quarter pants and T-shirt, and vivacious personality. When I met her, Sriya had been residing in Germany for nearly twenty years. After completing a diploma in accountancy at a prestigious technical school she had joined a private company in Colombo, and later migrated to Germany for work at the age of 38. Although her parents had brought her many proposals of marriage, Sriya had refused all of them. Unlike her sisters, whom I had also interviewed prior to meeting Sriya on her annual trip to Sri Lanka, Sriya spoke more loudly and laughed often. She was respectful and affectionate towards her mother and sisters, but asserted her self when she did not agree with them, or wanted something done her way like asking them all to leave the living-room before our interview started. Her nieces described her as the 'boss' of the family who made it her business to know what was going in each person's life, and whose opinion was sought when important decisions had to be made, especially with regards to marriage. They were all expected to answer her weekly phone calls during which they had to provide her with a full update of their lives. During her annual visit to Sri Lanka, she would spend all her time with her family—taking them on trips, attending to the parents' medical issues, and generally immersing herself in her extended family's activities.

Sriya's single status was certainly unusual given her age and family background. Sriya had also defied her parents' wishes for marriage and migrated to Germany for work at a time when young unmarried women from a middle-class family like hers living and working in Europe was uncommon as it was morally suspect. Sriya's life story, however, is a classic account of how acts of agency are represented through the trope of selflessness. Sriya claimed that she was never interested in marriage but desired financial stability and freedom instead. These desires, however, did not originate from a wish to escape her obligations to parents and kin, but derived from a sense of

[109] Namali was Sriya's niece whose family history I present in chapter four

responsibility towards them. Although she had remained unmarried by choice and migrated overseas against her parents' wishes, Sriya claimed for herself not the status of a rebel, but the role of a benefactor to her family.

Sriya's Story

Sriya's story begins with an assertion of her independence.

> *[I did everything] on my own, all on my own [...] I wanted to find something vocational. University would take too long. The younger of my older sisters was already in university; my oldest sister was married [...] My father had a lot of expenses for my younger sister. [Money] was quite tight in those days. That's why I wanted something through which I could find a job as soon as possible [...] I got the highest marks at the entrance exam [...] and I was the youngest candidate [...] I was also one of only three girls (enrolled in the course) [...] from Hunters I moved to Lanka Canneries. I got a good chance [sic] there. It was from there that I wanted to go to Germany [...] because at that time I always thought about money; how much money I could earn. Because at that time money was something I saw as very important [...]*

Sriya is candid about her parents' financial situation. At the time of his retirement, her father was not a high ranking officer with a comfortable income. Neither of her parents had acquired substantial property from their families and, therefore, did not have a house of their own in the village. Sriya presents her decision to start work soon and continue working without getting married as motivated by a consideration for her parents' situation. At first, Sriya gives the impression that her need for greater financial stability prompted her to migrate to Germany at the earliest opportunity and she did so while still young, thereby effectively ending the degree of authority her parents had over her as an unmarried daughter.

> *My goodness! [My parents] told me not to go. 'Don't go! Do young women migrate without being married?' They said 'no'. But I thought 'if I said I want to go, I am going.' After all it was not for anything immoral [...] I did not listen to my parents. Here's the thing. There were several proposals [of marriage] being brought for me [when I went back home for the weekend]. I used to come to my sister's place on Sunday evening. On Monday morning my father would call my office. Before I could put my bag down he would call me and ask whether I liked the person. I kept on saying 'no, no'. And my father would scold me.*

It is later when I was clarifying the chronology of events that I found out that Sriya had actually migrated much later at the age of 38. This meant that she had actually resisted the pressure to get married while still living in Sri Lanka—no easy task given the social pressure for women to be married and also the constant pressure she admitted to facing from her parents as well as sisters and brothers-in-law. Sriya's narrative, however, avoids the ten or more years she spent in Colombo, and focuses instead on her life in Germany, highlighting the freedom she felt when she arrived there.

> *They are very civilised. They have a good culture. It is difficult for a woman to live alone in Sri Lanka. There of course I was alone. I had no issues. It was wonderful.*

Sriya presents herself as a person with an extraordinary knack for nurture. Her story is dominated by her first experience as a nanny-cum-governess to the wilful daughter of a wealthy and educated couple.

> *Her name was Arianna. She was 2 ½ years old and absolutely beautiful [...] I had never seen [a child] as beautiful [as Arianna] [...] Her parents were professors. They already had two other servants. I was taken to look after the child [...] Already twenty people had come and gone. No one had stayed for more than three months [...] She was like a devil. She didn't even look at me first. She used to say I was black and dirty*

Sriya takes up the challenge of getting around Arianna by being loving, patient, and kind, but also firm. According to Sriya, Arianna developed *"a great love"* for her and loved her *"even more than her own nieces [did]."* Sriya also earns the trust of her employers who she says often deferred to her—*"[the professor] always told me 'please bring up my child to be like you.'"* I spent approximately three hours with Sriya and more than half of that time was devoted to Sriya's lengthy account of how she brought up Arianna according to her own philosophy.

> *Arianna's family is very rich [...] So, Arianna doesn't understand what poverty is. She hasn't even seen a poor person. So, I taught her many things. Not that I wanted to hurt her, but one summer we made bracelets and I asked to sit in a street corner and sell them and then donate the money to poor children [...] She had a driver to take her to school, but I made her walk the 2km or so [...] I spoke to her teachers and enrolled her in fencing [...] She was so beautiful; I didn't want*

> *anything happening to her when she was older [...] So I did a number of things like that to make her strong.*

As much as Sriya is keen to present herself as a surrogate mother, perhaps even as a better mother than Arianna's own in the way Sriya understood the child's needs and looked out for her future, it was equally important to Sriya to present herself as not in direct competition with her employer but as an integral member of the family with whom she had good relations.

> *I was with [Arianna] till she was 15 [...] Now even at that age she would feel more comfortable changing in front of me, she was more confident [sic] with me than her own mother. But her mother is a very nice person. I have never met a woman so good in my entire life. She's good with her family, with other people. She's so loving to her husband.*
>
> *To this day [she and the professor] are like my parents [...] All their friends and relatives know me because they treated me like I was one of the family. They also introduce me to others as one of the family. The professor introduces me as 'this is my older sister' and the [others] say 'this is my younger sister'. Because of that [their friends] all know me.*

Sriya often referred to her initial employers as her parents, although they were younger to her, and stressed that she was treated like a member of their family and, by extension, accepted as a family member by their friends and colleagues. It is within this narrative of an exceptional caregiver among fictive kin that Sriya presents herself as an independent woman. This, I believe, retains her identity as 'feminine' underscoring the importance of being a gendered actor in her narrative. Sriya describes her life in Germany as enmeshed within a network of relationships that could be compared to the extended kinship networks in Sri Lanka. Her employers had also given her part-time work as a book-keeper-cum-secretary in their family business when their daughter started schooling and Sriya was not needed on a full-time basis. Sriya also asserted that even she had many opportunities to make use of her qualifications and previous experience in the corporate sector in Sri Lanka, she continued to look after children because, as repeatedly asserted *"I really love little children [and] little children are very fond of me."*

It is also important for Sriya to present herself as an exceptional person. Sinhalese people sometimes talk about some people having the gift of 'receiving' (*labīma*). It is a way of explaining a person's success in life and the ability to attract other people's generosity. Sriya did not use the term *'labīma*,' but she evoked it. She described herself as possessing the qualities of a person who inspires generosity in others. Hence, despite the financial crisis that had affected the German economy and in turn adversely affected the Professors' many businesses, Sriya insisted that *"he is like my father [...] he wont let me go. Whatever happens [to his business], he continues to pay my salary."* She then described how her present employer gifted a very expensive cookery course for her birthday. *"They told me 'whatever we give you (for your birthday) won't be enough because of the kind of person you are'."*

Sriya's narrative, I believe, was also influenced by a desire to assert her class status. Migrant workers from Sri Lanka who work in homes are usually poor and come from a lower socio-economic background. They are generally referred to as domestic aides or 'servants' to the rich both in the media and in everyday conversation. Hence, it was important to both Sriya and her family to talk about the work she did as different and her status as equal to her employers. Namali, her niece, explained to me that her aunt did not *"associate with other Sri Lankans. The ones in [Germany] are all desperate people [...] who do odd jobs [...] My aunt has a good house [...] like Colombo 7* (the neighbourhood of the elite). *The [other] Sri Lankans live in places like Kochchikade"* (a working-class neighbourhood near the Colombo Port). Sriya is also careful not to present herself as a South Asian migrant surviving on her own in Germany, but rather as a woman living with family. Even though she mentioned that she earned enough money to live on her own, she was vague about her actual living arrangements and implied that she continued to live with a family. Sriya's nieces, however, had told me that their aunt lived alone, and had in fact, bought an apartment in a good neighbourhood. It is also important to Sriya to present herself as a caregiver; that despite her unmarried and childless status, she was a woman who neither lacked relationships in her life nor the qualities of nurture. What is interesting is how her family's accounts of Sriya did not in any way undermine Sriya's self presentation. Her mother, for instance, talked about Sriya's ward Arianna as if she was her own

grandchild. She claimed that she had framed photographs of her in their home and how her other grandchildren had met Arianna when they went to Germany. Her nieces told me how the professor had sponsored their visas when they visited their aunt; he had also asked them to stay in his house when he and his wife left for their summer vacation. Bruner (1990) asserts that cultures depend on "shared meanings and shared concepts (p.13). He explains that when a narrative has "an element of trouble […] that has moral consequences […] related to legitimacy, moral commitment, values," stories are told in a way that address "what is morally valued, morally appropriate, or morally uncertain" (p.50). Sriya's narrative addresses the moral dilemma that single womanhood would have posed to her family and answers the implicit questions that her status brings up. Even as Sriya asserts an independent and exceptional self, her narrative is framed within a normative discourse of a suffering and sacrificial woman.

> *I did everything on my own. Actually, when you live life alone, you face many things. You have to find your own answers. Although my parents are intelligent they are not very educated. So, I learnt many things from the outside (world). I helped Arianna to learn many things. I sacrificed a lot. You know how it is easier for the person who has endured many things to get back on their feet. When you suffer, it is much easier to get back on your feet. That's what happened [to me]. And that's what I wanted to teach Arianna without hurting her too much.*

On whose account did Sriya suffer? For whose sake did Sriya sacrifice? Sriya is unable to deploy the language of suffering and sacrifice without linking it to motherhood. In the above paragraph Sriya is almost implying that it is for the sake of Arianna rather than for her self that she endures and emerges as a strong woman. Even as Sriya stresses at the beginning of the interview that her motivation to migrate to Germany was instigated by her parents' financial situation, towards the end of the interview Sriya reiterates her selflessness as demonstrated by her indifference to material gain.

> *The professor admonishes me every day—'why aren't you applying for citizenship?' It's been 20 years now. I had completed [all the forms] but never put it in. I sent in the application only last month. I was thinking I can help other people. After all I have the young crowd [in my family] to think about. I thought about them and applied. I am not interested in material things. I built a house here. I wanted to. But I don't care who uses it. I am just happy that I provided shelter for*

someone [...] So many people ask me 'who will inherit your property?' People think like that. But I am not attached [to material things].

Sriya highlights the way she has worked hard to provide for her parents and assist the younger members of her extended family. Even though she is single and has no need to earn for her own children, Sriya dismisses any impression that others may have of her being materialistic or individualistic and presents a 'traditional' selfless 'self': she has provided for her parents by building them a house that she does not claim as her own; she has neglected to apply for citizenship even though she has been eligible for a number of years; and she continues to work in Germany only because she can assist her sisters' children to have a better future.

.....

Even though we chatted freely both prior to and after the interview, during the actual interview I hardly spoke. Once Sriya got started on her story about her life in Germany, she continued without any need for prompting and rarely paused long enough for me to ask a question. When she finally completed her story about her various relationships with her employers and their children, I asked whether it was permissible to pose a more 'personal' question. Sriya assured me that *"I could ask her anything."* So I asked her why she had decided to stay single despite the many proposals of marriage that had been presented by her parents.

S: *I wanted to live a solitary life. I can live on my own. I don't feel lonely; nor do I feel that I am alone in this world. If I were to have someone, then it would have been heavy. I go for films on my own [...] I am able to do things on my own.*

A: *But aunty you are someone who seems to have many close relationships [...]*

S: *I value relationships, but I do not have any expectations.*

A: *You have a very independent spirit [...] Do see yourself as different to your family.*

S: *I thought my mother spends from morning to night in the kitchen. Don't you think? She's always waiting [for someone]. My mother is always waiting for Subhashini (grand-daughter) to visit. Everyday it is a case of waiting around for someone. There is no end to it. You bring up your own children, then your children's children—so it is a perpetual waiting. If I start to cook something special, my mother will*

say 'let's wait till Friday' because she wants to wait until [the grand-children and son-in-law] come home. There is no end to this waiting.

***A:** Are you influenced by Buddhism?*

***S:** No, I am not a religious person. But I believe in doing the right thing […] Sometimes when I am quiet, Mrs. Krüger (employer) asks me 'what are you thinking.' When I tell her 'I'm thinking about the work I am doing', she tells me 'Please don't think too much, because if you think of something to do, then you always go ahead and do it!'*

The term Sriya repeats—*balāgena innawā,* means waiting and suggests the obverse of 'agency.' Sriya conveys through her repetition of the phrase that to be married with children is to have your life completely enmeshed within the life of your family. She describes her mother's life as having no purpose beyond serving the family or being motivated by anything other than the family. She sees her mother as having no self-worth beyond her family. Sriya, on the other hand, regards herself as different from her mother. By remaining unmarried she does not have to rely on others for her wellbeing—she has no 'expectations'. Sriya refers to marriage and children as 'heavy'—a burden that she did not wish to bear by choice. Her self-worth derives from making her own life plans and her own decisions. Sriya is not forced to fend for herself because she happens to be unmarried, but she is independent because she chose to be single. This segment of the interview, although brief and one that Sriya ends abruptly by changing the subject, nevertheless presents an 'ideological dilemma' without an easy resolution (Reynolds and Wetherell 2003).

Parish (1994) posits that the Newar conception of 'society' "has built into it the expectation that others will confer about and evaluate a person's behaviour" (p.89). While the pressure to conform flows from the way the Newars conceive of society as a moral agency, Parish describes how people often asserted moral norms even as they talked about circumventing them by denying in public what they did in private. Hence priority is given to the social and what is seen to be done, rather than the individual and what is actually done. Hence, as Parish shows for Nepal, people do not directly challenge the ethical status of the central institutions of family and religion, but rather they find ways "not to do exactly what moral norms require them to do […] [Hence] the discourse and actions that disguise or reframe the moral character of violations

create an ambiguity that allows people to act in violation of principles they uphold (p.91). Parish's interpretation of Newar ideas about society, I believe, is generally applicable in the Sri Lankan context as well, especially within the framework of marriage and family. I believe that Sriya's equivocal narrative about independence and self-sacrifice, about freedom and suffering, about being single and unfettered and yet being an exceptional nurturer and dutiful daughter is a way of upholding the cultural values of mothering nurture and responsibility to kin even as she defies the structure in which they are usually enacted —which is marriage.

Keshini (52) had also remained single despite pressure from her family to get married. Like Sriya, Keshini saw marriage as a loss of independence and also a loss of 'self.' The contrasting lives of two of Keshini's aunts had influenced her decision to remain single. One of her aunts, who had remained single after a failed love affair, was to Keshini a symbol of independence.' *"If she was to go somewhere she would go. [The] others would have to take the children, the bottles, and bags you know [...] She would visit us often and would just come with her bag that is all. She was fun to have around."* The other aunt personified to Keshini the loss of 'self'. Keshini recalls how her aunt described her marriage as *"ruining her life"* and "*suppressing her creativity*."[110] Like Sriya, Keshini rejects marriage, but presents herself as maternal and talked about how much she adored her nephew and niece. Even though Keshini asserts her desire to be single, she recalls imagining herself as Louisa May Alcott's character Jo and choosing to lead an unconventional life by *"setting up a children's home."* Unlike her mother who is a famous musician—a talent Keshini shares and believes she could have pursued to the heights her mother did, Keshini asserts that she was not keen to pursue such a self-consuming profession that she believes made her mother erratic in fulfilling her maternal duties and obligations. Instead, Keshini dedicates her life to the poor by immersing herself in development work. Keshini implies here that even though her mother's life was structured by marriage, her actions did not always conform to the

[110] I produce verbatim the conversation as recalled by Keshini: "*I told her that it is not my dream to be married. If I want to paint I want to do that. I want to have the freedom to do what I want. Then all of a sudden she started crying and I was wondering if I had said something wrong [...] and she said 'no, I gave up so much for this marriage. It is after 12 years that I realised that. She said (here Keshini speaks in Sinhala):'My marriage has ruined my life. I had so many desires; I wanted to be so creative. I could not do anything because of this marriage. I lost everything because of this marriage.'*

cultural ideal of a self-sacrificing mother. Keshini suggests that she, on the other hand, enacts the cultural ideal of selflessness outside the structures of marriage.

People like Sriya and Keshini who reject their social obligation to both kin and society by remaining single continue to be accepted as moral persons without facing ostracism from society for several reasons. The most important of these is their family's acceptance of them. They are not rejected by their families but are thought to be a vital member of the kin group. This because of how they present the self—not as wilful and selfish individuals, but as loyal and devoted members of the family committed to meeting their social obligations. If they are thought to be somewhat eccentric as was the case for both Sriya and Keshini, it was because of their excessive commitment to their work. Sriya's older sister would often ask her when she is going to retire, and Keshini never tired of travelling out of Colombo despite her ill-health. Such narratives about the 'self' carve out spaces for an alternate life even as it demonstrates the enduring relational 'self' that continues to be embedded within a 'web of relatedness.'

3. The Younger Generation – Accountability and Modernity

In this section, I will examine the stories told by women from the younger generation who had gone through divorce or remained single past the culturally acceptable marriageable age. Their narratives reveal an intense internal conflict between the need to assert the 'self' and its desires, and the pressure to express these desires only in culturally sanctioned ways. In contrast to the narrative of the long-suffering wife of the previous generation, young divorced women did not emphasise personal suffering but presented the break up of their marriages as an outcome of incompatibility. They presented their decision as mutually consensual and they had parted with their spouses without rancour. Alongside this 'rational' account of divorce, however, ran a parallel narrative of fate. Young women eventually explained the break up of their marriages as having been predicted by astrologers whom they had ignored in their haste to get married despite their parents' misgivings. Single women in their 30s

talked about successfully dodging their parents' attempts to get them married and resisting the social pressure to 'settle down'. These young women were sceptical about marriage because it meant a curtailment of the independence and freedom they had earned by being educated and having a career. None of them admitted to wanting to be married; neither did they reject marriage altogether. They justified their reluctance to get married as not having enough knowledge to make an important life choice and a desire to be more educated if they are to make better life choices.

3.1. Divorce – Making Right Choices at the Wrong Time

In this section I look at the life stories of young divorced women and examine how they described and justified the choices they made. Unlike several of the older women who had stated that divorce was not a choice they could have made despite the fact that they were unhappy and, sometimes, subject to abuse, the women from the younger generation had filed for divorce when they realised that their incompatibilities could not be sorted out. I am not suggesting that all young women belonging to the urban middle-class in Sri Lanka who are unhappy in their marriages file for divorce.[111] On the contrary, I had heard and knew of women who tolerated overly possessive or philandering husbands, and continued to stay in abusive relationships. However, none of the younger married women I spoke to even hinted at being discontent with their marital relationships. They sometimes referred to their husband's quirks and foibles, but none of them gave me the impression that any of it was distressing or threatening to their wellbeing. I do not intend to, however, compare the narratives of two generations in this section, but identify the interpretative repertoires that these women used in their presentation of the 'self' and in explaining the choices they had made.

What I immediately noticed during my interviews with young divorced women was that they did not talk about their former husbands negatively or even as people who

[111] Several Judges who presided over divorce cases claimed that divorce was on the rise. They claimed that divorce had overtaken the number of land dispute cases, which were the two main categories of cases heard in the district court.

had wronged or hurt them. All of them spoke about incompatibility and irreconcilable differences. All of them, even Ruwanthi whose husband was an incurable alcoholic, continued to communicate with their ex-husbands, and most of them declared that they 'remained friends' after the divorce. Some of the younger women even insisted that their new spouses or partners had no issues with them maintaining such a relationship with their ex-husbands. Maintaining 'good' relationships seemed important to their sense of 'self' and suggests a gendered subject position of a 'good woman' not unlike that evoked by older women's narratives. Like those in stable marriages, the divorced women also asserted that they had chosen their husbands and did not even once profess to have made a mistake in their choice of partner.[112] Moreover, even though their parents were initially upset and disappointed with their daughter's divorce, the young women claimed that their parents and kin eventually accepted what had happened and continued to treat them with affection. The narratives, however, revealed an internal struggle between wanting to assert the 'modern choosing person' and reverting to culturally acceptable narratives that highlighted fate and circumstance in the choices they had made. These competing interpretative repertoires formed what Reynolds and Wetherell (2003) describe as "rhetorical point and counter-point […] creating a powerful set of ideological dilemmas without easy resolution" (p.501).

Roshanthi's Story

I met Roshanthi and Neomal through a mutual friend. We had all gone out to dinner after a play when the conversation turned to my research. When I explained what I was doing and how I was currently meeting astrologers, Neomal exclaimed *"you should speak to my mother [...] in fact you should speak to us if you want to know about the influence of horoscopes on marriage!"* They then proceeded to tell me that they were both divorced and that these divorces had been predicted by astrologers who had read their horoscopes and warned them against making such a decision. But regardless of

[112] I only had the opportunity to interview one divorcee from the older generation. Jinani (54) blamed her mother for compelling her to elope when she "hammered" her for refusing to go to university. Jinani then blamed her husband entirely for the break down of the marriage and talked at length about how badly she was treated by him even after the divorce. Jinani's story was a bitter account of neglect and abuse and she eventually cursed him for the suffering he had caused her.

their warnings, they had gone ahead with marriage.[113] Neomal laughingly told me how fate had colluded with Neomal's mother to enact his destiny when she had married him off during a brief reprieve in his 'bad' period, rather than wait till he was 35 when the bad period was over. In the case of Roshanthi, fate was stronger than parental control—she had eloped a month before her 'bad' period was over. It is Roshanthi's story that I present here.

Roshanthi (36) came from an upper-middle-class Sinhala Buddhist family. Her father—an engineer, and her mother—a career diplomat, both believed in horoscopes, and, like many Sinhala-Buddhist families, consulted an astrologer periodically to have their horoscopes read. Roshanthi's family had moved to England when she was eighteen when her mother got an appointment at the Sri Lankan embassy there. After spending fifteen years in the UK Roshanthi had returned to Sri Lanka and was working in the corporate sector when I met her. Roshanthi begins her story by talking about the circumstances of her early marriage and events preceding her divorce. It is significant that 'horoscopes' and 'fate' act as the pivot of the story even as she claims to have acted on her own volition. Throughout the interview, Roshanthi oscillates between presenting herself as a modern woman who always asserted her will over the expectations of her parents, and presenting her life story as directed by fate.

Roshanthi begins her life story at the age of seventeen when, despite being under the surveillance of her family and the conservative Sinhala-Buddhist school she attended, Roshanthi had gotten involved with a young man. Roshanthi's parents, who were unaware of the relationship, were concerned about their eldest daughter because her horoscope indicated the possibility of a divorce if she married young.[114]

> *This whole thing started with [my parents] lecturing me about not having a boyfriend. So I told them that I had one. They told me to complete my studies before getting serious. You know how they read horoscopes throughout the year for life? And it had said if I get*

[113] As explained in chapter five, astrologers often talked about attraction that two people feel for each other as a powerful force.

[114] Many people claim that getting one's horoscope read is a way of being forearmed with knowledge. This enables people to make more informed decisions and avoid what may seem like irrevocable situations and events.

> *married before my twenty-second birthday that it will end up in a divorce; that I would have two marriages if I married before I was twenty-two.*

Roshanthi recalls how as a teenager she did not take astrology too seriously and merely followed the rituals to please her parents and kin. She even remembered making light of her parents' concerns about her boyfriend.

> *I had never been a person who extremely believed in horoscopes. Even when I was doing my A/L's they said to leave the house at a particular time looking east or north, that sort of thing, [and] I practiced because it was practiced at home. But just on my own I never sort of believed it. I was so in love [at that time]. I was 17 you know! Getting married before my twenty-second birthday seemed like it would never happen. I talked to [my boyfriend] and he said that if it does happen we could always get divorced and remarry. We did have options—so what!? So once we went to the UK, my parents were not too much into matching the horoscopes. It was sort of like I was going to do it no matter what.*

At this time Roshanthi had also clashed with her parents on her choice of partner. Her parents had disapproved of the relationship because his family did not occupy the same status as Roshanthi's especially with regard to educational attainment and value given to education.[115] Having refused to terminate the relationship Roshanthi presents her younger self as confident of even defying fate for the sake of the choice of partner she had made.

> *My parents had put a restriction saying that I shouldn't get married till I finished my PhD. I was just doing my undergraduate [...] and they were talking about finishing my PhD! I couldn't think of being in school anymore [...] [and] then things got a little bad at home [...] so he and I had to decide whether we were going to get married or not. So we eloped pretty much. My parents had no say in it, so we eloped about a month before my 22nd birthday. And at that time it didn't occur to me if I had stayed another month it would I would be going over that. It did but I was young, he is my age too, and we decided to get married. That is how we avoided the whole horoscope thing.*

Roshanthi also emphasises that she was determined to make it on her own despite the financial difficulties they faced and even after her parents forgave her.

> *Now my mom was saying 'we are not mad at you; you just come home. What has happened has happened. We have accepted it now.'*

[115] As mentioned in chapter six, Roshanthi's parents had insisted he apply to at least a vocational training course in the UK in an attempt to raise him up to their socio-economic status and 'save face.'

> *And she was OK with it, but I never went to stay with them. I would always go visit them and come back. I never stayed the night.*

Roshanthi did not share the details of what had gone wrong in their marriage and what compelled her to file for divorce. She only revealed that she had stayed married for seven years during which time they had separated twice. She remembered calling her aunt after she had separated for the second time and *"did not know where she was heading."*

> *When we got separated (for the second time) [...] I was sort of mentally down [...] I [asked my aunt, "Can you get my horoscope checked?" And she was like "why would you want that of all people?" So, I was like "ah . . . I'm tired of looking for a job I'm tired of going to school again [...]" I just gave her bogus reasons [...] She called me back the next day and said, "Well I think it's because you're going through a separation. You're not telling the truth." I was like "shit!!"*

Horoscopes dominated Roshanthi's life-story and the role of fate framed her narrative. It served as a way of absolving her culpability in defying her parents and making a wrong choice. A bad marriage had been predicted and Roshanthi had acted according to the script—she had eloped just a month before her 22nd birthday—demonstrating the sheer force of destiny. And yet, Roshanthi is reluctant to completely erase her self from the realm of action. Even as she talks about fate, Roshanthi talks about her life course as being steered by the decisions she had made after consideration and forethought.

> *So then after that I sort of started believing the horoscope a little bit, but I didn't go to extremes with it. Then we decided that we were going to get back together and give it another try and then we gave it another try. And when it happened again, that was when we decided to end it. . . . But he and I are still good friends. So we talked about it. If we had kids would we have separated and gotten divorced? Probably not. It was not as if we were fighting, and it wasn't like we were sick of each other. It was just not working out. If we had kids, we would have considered the kids and we would have had a civil marriage going. Well, I don't know how it would have worked out. We [had] decided together not to have kids also, so it was not like that was a reason [for the] separation. We were good with each other and we are still good [sic]. I think it would have been different under different circumstances, but in our horoscope. . .* (she does not complete the sentence). A*nd that is why I believe [in horoscopes].*

Roshanthi frames the next episode in her life—her second marriage—within a similarly equivocal narrative that oscillates between fate and agency.

> *My mother had checked the horoscope again and she said that it says that you are going to have another good marriage, but you need to match your horoscope, so then I was like "OK, whatever" [...] But when I had come [to Sri Lanka] for a wedding,[my friend] and I had gone to this [astrologer]. He said, "no way are you married [and] by now you should know who [your new husband] is." There were a few people hanging around, but I was having a hard time figuring out who [...] Then he said "wear this ring and this will help you to clear your mind and by January 16th (this was on December 23rd) by January 16th you will know." Before I came I had talked to Neomal's sister [about meeting up] because I was in touch with her [...] we had all played together when we were kids [...] Neomal and I had been in touch on Facebook[and because] I was here for only two weeks I told him "I'm meeting your sister, why don't you join us?" So that was on the 26th, we went out together on the 27th and 28th. He asked for my number saying he will call me. By the time I had landed in the UK he had already called me, e-mailed me, sms-ed me, messaged me on FB [...] And it sort of happened that on the January 11th he said "how about you and me?" This guy had said January 16th [...] I was like really amazed [...] So it ended up that we got married last September within nine months of meeting!*
>
> *[...]*
>
> *I always knew I wanted to get married again, I don't mind living on my own I have been [...] I am very independent. I can take care of myself but I need that emotional aspect. For that purpose I knew I will get married again. So when I met Neomal that was the first thing I told him. His ex-wife [had stayed] at home. I told him "I'm not a stay at home type. I need to make my own money. I need to keep myself occupied whether I have money or not. I need to find my own money. I like to do my own things like drive, meet up with friends" and he was OK with it. He's a very independent person and I suppose I'm quite different from his ex- wife. He was looking for someone who is independent so that worked out!*

.....

Roshanthi's use of fate even as she asserts control over her life story was not unusual. Mayanthi (36), for example, talked about how both hers and her husband's parents had known the marriage would not work out, and therefore encouraged them to live

abroad to reduce the influence of the planetary positions.[116] Mayanthi, however, like Roshanthi was keen to maintain that the final decision was reached after much self-reflection and also discussion with her husband. However, they both implicitly blamed their parents for their 'hasty' decisions. Roshanthi had implied that by placing so much pressure on her to finish her PhD before she got married, it compelled her to rebel by eloping at a young age. Even Mayanthi insinuated that her parents forced her to get registered as soon as possible when they found out she was planning to visit her boyfriend who was working overseas at the time. They were concerned about their daughter's reputation and insisted she be married before she 'lived' with him even for a few days. Nevertheless, running parallel to the themes of irrevocable fate and parental coercion was a need to assert themselves as people in control of their lives.

3.2. Being Single – an 'ideological dilemma' without resolution?

The young women I met who had remained single past the culturally acceptable age of marriage and continued to stave off the pressure to get married grappled with a similar dilemma in their presentation of the self. In their case, they did not want to anger or disappoint their parents by refusing to get married, but promised to do so after they completed their education. Because these young women had passed their 'marriageable' age, the parents were now looking to arrange a marriage on their behalf—something that deeply offended these young women's sense of 'self.' They had made choices all their life and did not want to be forced into marriage even if their opinion was sought in the decision making process. They asserted that it was the wrong time for them to get married because of their ambitions for higher education. Because compatibility in education was critical for a successful marriage, these young women felt it was better to find someone after they had earned their Masters or PhDs and presented this argument to their parents. But in reality, they confessed to being conflicted about marriage itself and were deeply concerned that it was perhaps something they did not desire. Two of them confessed to being comfortable the way

[116] Because individual horoscopes are based on the position of the planets in a given period of time, a person's physical location is important in calculating 'good' and 'bad' times. Therefore, a person can theoretically reduce the influence of a 'bad' planet by moving to a different location on the globe.

they are and did not want to get married and risk losing the good life they had now. They were concerned that marriage would jeopardize their wellbeing and threaten their sense of 'self.' Chulani (27) for example said

> *I think times have changed in the sense that you value yourself so much. You have achieved so much for yourself so you hold yourself to a higher esteem; I don't know a certain importance that you give yourself. You think whoever should be worth it, otherwise what is the point?*

Chulani seems to be questioning both the 'traditional' and 'modern' narratives about marriage and romance as what makes a woman's life fulfilled.

Chulani and the others single women I spoke to continued to keep the discussion about marriage open with their parents. They consented sometimes to meeting people their parents would introduce and would even go through the motions of meeting the parents of prospective grooms. None of them refused to get married, but kept putting it off thereby leaving the question of marriage in a perpetual state of limbo. Many of the women who were single wanted to live in Western countries and were actively looking for opportunities to leave Sri Lanka. They hoped, I believe, by leaving the country they could claim 'out there' the promise of a purer freedom that modernity did not offer in Sri Lanka.

Mody (2008) observes that agency is often interpreted as a combination of freedom and efficacy, "without the all important counterpart of accountability (p.193). People like Roshanthi, Mayanthi, and Chulani were caught between their desire to assert their individuality even as they are acutely conscious of their accountability to parents and kin. Their dilemma is not unlike Sriya's and Keshini's. But the crucial difference between the generations is the degree to which this struggle was apparent in their narratives. The older women seemed to deploy normative narratives with seeming ease without a display of internal conflict. In contrast, the younger women grappled with what seemed to them conflicting ideas about the 'choosing person.' Perhaps this had to do with maturity—older women had become more adept at managing the ideological dilemma their single status presented. However, unlike the narratives of divorced women who readily used the idiom of 'fate, single women did not seem to

have a set of interpretative repertoires that were acceptable to their sense of 'self.' Unlike the older women, the younger women presented a 'self' that was more stable and one which could maintain its integrity across diverse situations (Markus and Kitayama 2003; Spencer 1997). This suggests then that cultural concepts of the person were changing over time. Previously I argued that a significant difference between the generations was the narrative devices used in the representation of individual agency. While it was important for the older women to present their decisions as a collective one, young people are compelled to represent themselves as independent actors. To be modern then is to think of personhood in a particular way—as thinking actors and choosing individuals. But in cultural contexts in which family and kin ties are critical for people's sense of security and belonging, where accountability to others is as important as one's freedom, the social embedded-ness of the person continues to wield considerable power over individual notions of the person. In such a context, the fault-lines between the 'choosing person' and the 'relational self' presented an ideological dilemma that could not be easily resolved through narratives that were comprehensible to others. This is perhaps one of the main reasons single womanhood, more than divorce, caused such distress to families.

4. Conclusion

Parish (1994) argues that the capacity for reflection, for re-relating self to culture, and culture to self, surely contributes to the development of different meanings for shared cultural concepts or symbols; the dominant concepts of a culture may be resisted by reflective individuals, who may construct alternative ways of knowing self, society, and world using any one of a number of modes of thoughts" (p.72). In Sri Lanka, these alternative meanings emerge from within the collective desire to remain whole rather than disintegrate.

Marriage in Sri Lanka, like in other parts of South Asia, is associated with prosperity, wellbeing and is the main signifier of a person's success in life. For women from the older generation to admit to an unsuccessful marriage is to effectively admit that their

adult life is more or less a failure. Being divorced or being single makes women of both generations vulnerable to various forms of public derision. The narratives then are, on the one hand, stories that are told to convince others and their own selves that they are 'good' women; that their actions are the result of fate and circumstance or motivated by selfless intentions and not by selfish desires or an aversion to familial duties and obligations. One of the things that struck me about family and kin ties in Sri Lanka is how, despite a strong emphasis on maintaining status, families were remarkably tolerant of its unconventional members. After the initial furore over inappropriate relationships, elopement, refusal to get married, divorce and so forth, families eventually faced these various contingencies not by alienating kin for the sake of family honour, but by reintegrating them within the family. These narratives therefore, I believe, also prevent the disintegration of kinship ties. Rather than having to face rejection for bringing shame on the family by their unconventional behaviour, these narratives provide a way for people to continue to be integral members of their kin group. In return, close kin who have expressed their displeasure and anger in private will often ignore the sometimes obvious discrepancies between what people say and what people do and instead corroborate these stories of victimhood. Overall, these narratives maintain social order. Instead of exiling them for being social outcastes, these narratives provide a way to assimilate those who do not conform, thereby preventing irreparable damage to the web of social relations that hold families together. This in turn enables families to present a unified, morally coherent collective 'self' to others.

8 - Conclusion

The broad objective of my thesis was to use the lens of marriage to capture in miniature the social transformation that has been taking place in Sri Lanka from the early twentieth century to the present. I set up my canvas in the Sinhala-Buddhist middle-class community living in the capital city Colombo. The questions I asked in order to begin were: How have marriage practices changed in Sri Lanka? What historical processes underline these changes? And, how are these changes entwined with shifting notions of the 'self'? My study aimed to understand how notions of the 'self' are constructed within and transformed by social, cultural, economic, and political contexts, and how changes in marriage practices are producing different notions of gendered selves and gendered agency. I found marriage a privileged site to investigate these questions and marriage narratives a source of rich and variegated stories about the 'self' and what it means to be a modern person.

The 'choosing person' is the central image of this thesis. It emerged from within my respondents' narratives and captures the way many in the younger generation talked about themselves as self-assured individuals capable of making one of life's most important decisions—choosing who to marry. The image was also evoked by the older generation in talking about themselves as liberal parents who, having inculcated the correct values in their children and understanding the importance of freedom, allow their children to choose the 'right' partner. I argued, therefore, that middle-class families have collectively invested in the idea of the 'choosing person' because it exemplifies how successful families have been in producing 'modern' subjects without compromising on 'traditional' values. The emphasis that my respondents placed on 'choice' rather than 'love' as the basis of modern marriage is the main reason why I argued that the term 'self-choice' marriages captures more than 'love' what modern marriages signify to people. Indeed, underlying the image of the 'choosing person' is the contrast people perpetually evoked between the past and present, between 'tradition' and 'modernity'. To choose was to be 'modern'; to choose *well* was to be

different, progressive, and successful.

In chapter four I interrogated the central contrast animating the assertion of the 'choosing person' by providing a historical overview of Sinhala marriage practices. Such an overview highlighted the way in which many of the changes did not map onto the usual understanding of 'tradition' as having its origins in a distant past and 'modern' norms as having emerged in a more recent present; nor did it mirror the conventional interpretation of 'tradition' as constricting and 'modern' as progressive. I showed how the formal arranged marriage with 'outsiders', which is regarded as the prototype of traditional Sinhala marriage, was one of many traditional practices of the past and was, in fact, only followed by some families occupying the upper ranks of village society. With the emergence of the middle-class and the spread of commercialisation and urbanisation from the early nineteenth century onwards, formal arranged marriage became more widespread in the early-twentieth century. Marriage alliances with outsiders became a principle strategy for social mobility amongst the educated and also the nouveau-riche urban middle-class families intent on consolidating their status. I also showed that the 'traditional' Sinhala-Buddhist wedding ceremony has its roots in the nationalist movement of the late-nineteenth century that sought to 'invent tradition' as part of its project to assert an authentic Sinhala identity against the colonial presence (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). Moreover, the influence of Victorian norms on women's sexuality was reified through a nationalist discourse that envisioned the 'ideal Sinhala woman' resulting in an increased surveillance of women's chastity and virtue. If the 'traditional past' was partially fictional, I showed how the 'modern' too is contrived. Through the marriage histories of my respondents, I illustrated that 'self-choice' marriage is not a new phenomenon among the Sinhalese and was already being practiced by a significant number of people in the mid-twentieth century. Schooling and employment along with urban living had increased women's mobility and the opportunities to meet people outside of one's kin group, resulting in many initiating romantic relationships that were subsequently accepted by parents.

The propensity to read the 'modern' as progressive, however, is challenged on many fronts. In chapter four, I also argued that the shift from marriage with 'known' entities to marriage with the 'unknown' has increased people's anxieties about marriage. As a way of managing these fears and coping with uncertainty, I showed how people are relying on comprehensive 'background checks' and astrology to bolster the 'choices' they are making. In addition, the growth of the wedding industry signals a significant shift away from the familial to the market, which is skilfully catering to the various needs and desires of modern families. Not only are the status concerns of the middle-class being amplified through the lavish commercial wedding, but it has also become an important rite-of-passage for young people and their families to assert their individualised self through their sense of the modern 'aesthetic' (Bourdieu 1984). Moreover, I showed how young women's desires are being structured by the market when they enact their romantic fantasies through wedding photographs and present a more sexualised femininity in the form of the alluring bride, thereby "unwittingly enmeshing themselves in an extraordinarily complex set of new power relations" (Abu-Lughod 1990, p.51).

In chapter five I described the principal characteristics of 'self-choice' marriages. A close emotional bond between the couple and also sexual intimacy and pleasure were highlighted to explain how 'modern' marriages were different and better than those in the past (Grossberg 1996) I asked: do narratives that emphasise a change in marriage as social obligation to marriage as personal desire suggest that women in Sri Lanka now have more room for manoeuvre? By comparing the narratives of women from the older and younger generations I argued that the difference between them is not encapsulated in the way marriage practices have significantly changed, but in the narrative devices used in representing the 'modern' self as a 'choosing person' (Collier 1997). In their narratives, older women spoke of their 'choices' as already approved by parents and kin thereby presenting their selves as deferring to the collective. Younger women, on the other hand, emphasised making independent decisions motivated by individual preference, which their parents had to eventually accept. By illustrating that parents and kin continued to exert considerable influence on the choices people made, I showed that young women, despite their claims to knowing their own minds, are

deeply anxious about choosing the 'right' partner. Mody (2008) underscores the importance of inserting the concept of 'accountability' into discussions about people's agency. In Sri Lanka I showed how young women weigh the consequences of enacting their inner desires against their accountability to family and kin. I extended Mody's thesis to argue that in Sri Lanka women often experience agency as a burden and regard it as a responsibility they must take seriously. As a result, although both young men and women position themselves as being different and more progressive than their parents, I showed how young people manage their anxieties about choosing by reinterpreting cultural resources. I argued that meticulous 'background checks' and comparing horoscopes are ways of managing their fears of being accepted by their families and also their uncertainty about the future. These practices, I argued, ultimately demonstrate that young people, like their parents, are ambivalent about love as the only basis for marriage.

In chapter six I analysed the significant influence caste and class considerations exert in shaping people's choices in marriage. I argued that because marriage in contemporary Sri Lanka continues to be a principal strategy for social mobility for the middle-class, caste and class are critical markers of distinction and important to asserting status. In chapter three I had asked—how are we to understand the historical person? This background chapter provided an overview of the discourses and practices that are critical to understanding the role caste and class play in the way middle-class identities are deployed in contemporary Sri Lanka. The ranks of the middle-class have expanded rapidly following economic liberalisation in the late 1970s and more recently with the impact of globalisation. I argued that both caste markers and class distinction are important to middle-class families because they provide ways of asserting difference *within* a middle-class that is regarded as an amorphous group made up of various ranks of people. Even though caste has lost much of its significance in public life, I argued that it continues to have symbolic value in marriage because people still subscribe to the idea of caste as embodiment. A person's manners and values were seen to signify the 'essence' of the self who was constituted by their family history rather than individual achievement. Notions about high castes and family histories, however, are not separate from ideas about class and people's class background. I

suggested that the way in which caste continues to persist by intermingling with class suggests a "discursive *bricolage* whereby an older discourse […] is 'recovered', 'modified', 'encased', and 'encrusted' in new forms (Stoler 1995, p.61 *emphasis in original*).

In chapter six I also showed how class—denoted by education, career prospects, knowledge of English, wealth, and place of residence—were important in determining compatibility in marriage and, therefore, seen to be critical for a 'good' marriage. Higher education and knowledge of English was seen as the two most important factors in enabling social mobility and middle-class families, therefore, invested heavily in their children's education. I argued that 'class', however, was not a matter of individual achievement, but judged on the basis of a person's family history. Class mobility, therefore, was achieved through the collective efforts of the family. The overall objective of this chapter was to demonstrate that class has a profound influence over people's choices in marriage and inform how families express difference; hence marriage is a central institution through which class is reproduced.

In chapter seven I took a step back from examining the 'choosing person' from different angles to pose the question—is the trope of individual agency central to *all* narratives about marriage? By examining a different set of stories related by women about failed marriages and single womanhood, I demonstrated how different selves emerge in various contexts and that it was important to identify the institutional contexts that enable or censure particular deployments of the 'self' (Spencer 1997). I argued that the 'choosing person' is censured when women's lives do not embody the culturally accepted norm of a happily married woman. I showed how in such situations repertoires about fate and circumstance are more acceptable and, therefore, deployed by both older and younger women as a way of explaining unhappy marriages, divorce, and single womanhood. I illustrated that while older women often spoke from the subject positions of the 'self-sacrificing mother' and 'long-suffering wife', younger women, on the other hand, were reluctant to completely abandon their assertion of agency even as they spoke about fate and parental coercion. I suggested that this was perhaps indicative of the younger generations' way of holding

onto a sense of the 'modern individual self'.

In delineating the changing marriage practices of the Sinhala-Buddhist middle-class in Sri Lanka, this thesis has unearthed several layers of tensions: marriage as a social obligation is being reconfigured as individual achievement; marriage customs and rituals that were defined and performed within a familial context is now being structured through the market; and marriage that was integral to social status is now signalling a globalised modernity. These tensions foreground the fault lines of the 'choosing person'. Through this thesis I deconstructed the image of an individualised 'choosing person' to reveal a less unitary, relational self with permeable boundaries. I illustrated how the family, caste and class, and also the market structure people's choices and challenge the notion of an agentic self. The thesis demonstrates how the market has become a key site of symbolic production in Sri Lanka; the wedding industry in particular and class assertion as a whole evidence the way in which the market structures people's choices and 'self' presentations (Sahlins 1976).

In the penultimate chapter I asserted that amongst the Sinhalese the desire to remain whole rather than disintegrate is perhaps one of the strongest compulsions. The unit through which 'wholeness' is most powerfully expressed is the family. This is demonstrated at many different levels. It is clear in the way class status and distinction is expressed through the family rather than through individual achievement. It is also evident in the way marriage facilitates social mobility not only for the individuals concerned, but also provides a way of enhancing the status of the families involved. It is also demonstrated in the way families maintained respectability—a principal concern of the middle-class. I had established in chapter three how a gendered code of respectability, which was produced through the intermingling of cultural conceptions of shame (*læjja-baya*) with colonial ideas about women's morality and then reworked through a nationalist rhetoric, had a significant influence on how women conducted themselves in the public and private domains. I had argued that such a code seemed to place the burden of maintaining respectability more on women's shoulders. The responsibility of the 'choosing person', therefore, is differently experienced by men and women. In chapters four and five, I illustrated

how to be seen in public with a man was to invite rumours that questioned a woman's virtue and thereby undermine a family's honour. It was also to jeopardise a woman's chance of procuring a good marriage. I also showed that it was not only parents, but also young men who were anxious about protecting their future wives' virtue and reputations. Imposing rules about dress and keeping track of girlfriends' movements belied the 'freedom' that young women espoused. Hence, I argued that anxieties around courtship and secret courtship practices demonstrate that the gendered code of behaviour continues to structure how women present themselves and limit the ways in which they can experience their sexuality.

Families, however, also endeavoured to present themselves as coherent by accommodating children's desires even as children sought parental approval for the decisions they made. This was particularly evident in the way women who did not conform to the norm of 'a happily married woman' were accommodated through narratives that strove to explain these women's behaviour through a moral framework rather than rejecting them from the family. Although the family presents itself to the public as the principal site through which women's sexuality is controlled, these alternative narratives, in providing a way of concealing unconventional ways of being, suggest that the family is far more accommodating than it first appears.

Limitations of the Study

When I first started on this project, I had intended to study marriage from three different perspectives: the family, the state, and the market. It was my intention to delineate how marriage is conceptualised in different institutions and what discourses about marriage are produced within them. In the end, I limited my study to one of these domains. Having had a glimpse of both the wedding industry and divorce courts I am aware that a far more complex and in-depth understanding of marriage in Sri Lanka could emerge from including these domains in the discussion.

Another limitation of my study is the absence of young people between the ages of 18-25. This particular group's presence in public places seems to have increased in the

past several years. In the past boys and girls were seen together in large cliques in a movie theatre or a school carnival. Young couples were rare. Today, however, there seem to be more young couples 'hanging-out' in the various cafes, coffee-shops, malls, and movie theatres that have burgeoned in the city. These young people's perspectives on courtship and marriage would have, I believe, added an important dimension to my study.

A postscript

Much of the writing I did in the final stages of this project was in a coffee shop in the heart of the city. On one occasion I looked up to see Shalini's (a respondent) seventeen-year-old daughter having coffee with a group of friends. When I happened to catch her eye, she walked up to speak to me. I forgot about the incident until Shalini gave me a call a few days later. The reader may recall that Shalini was the respondent who had eloped at the age of nineteen and later regretted hurting her parents. Shalini sounded agitated and asked me whether I had time to speak to her. When I said I did, she began by asking me "Did you see him? […] Was she alone with him?" It took me a while to realise that she was asking me about my encounter with her daughter. I assured her that Dharini was with a group of friends and that I did not notice her paying attention to any particular boy. Shalini told me that Dharini had been grounded because she had been spending too much time on the phone with a boy she had assured her mother "was just a friend." Dharini was a bright student and a senior prefect in her school. She was also the captain of her school's tennis team as well as a talented dancer. Shalini was always extremely proud of Dharini's accomplishments. During the call, however, Shalini sounded extremely upset with her daughter. Dharini's boyfriend, I was told, belonged to

> *one of those new rich families […] who didn't care about education […] she's doing her A/levels and this is not the time for her to get distracted […] Unlike them, we can't afford to send her to university without a scholarship […] What am I supposed to tell [my husband] when he finds out about this!*

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